

NOVEL
2

Written by
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Matsuuni

DRUGSTORE in ANOTHER world

~ The Slow Life of a ~
Cheat Pharmacist ~

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Seven Seas Entertainment

CHEAT KUSUSHI NO SLOW LIFE:
ISEKAI NI TSUKURO DRUGSTORE VOL. 2

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Chapter 1:

Handle with Care

I'D STARTED USING that meadow Zeral lent me to cultivate more herbs for the drugstore. Thanks to my Cultivation Ace skill, the herbs—which were perennials—flourished. Today, I was finally harvesting them.

“Whew!” I wiped sweat from my brow, looking down at the basket of plants I'd collected so far.

The herbs growing in the meadow could sustain the drugstore completely, so if I kept this pace up, I'd never have to risk encountering a monster in the forest to collect them.

Well, not for these particular herbs, at least. I'd still need to visit the woods to gather herbs I hadn't cultivated. But, hey, the meadow was a step in the right direction. I could even sell the medicinal plants I grew there to other pharmacists nearby.

The one bummer was that, because of the repellent in the meadow, Noela refused to join me to gather herbs no matter how many times I invited her. I understood, but it was lonely doing gardening chores without anyone to talk to.

I spotted an old man and woman working in a nearby field, sweating and holding their lower backs.

“Hrm,” the older gentleman said. “This isn't gonna work without the hoe.”

“I sent it out for repairs two weeks back, and they still ain't done!” the old woman replied. “What's taking so long?”

I wondered what'd happened. “Good day, folks!”

“Ah! Well, if it isn't Mr. Pharmacist!” The man doffed his hat. “Good day to you, too!”

“Is something the matter?”

“We still ain't gotten our hoe back from the tool shop,” he replied. “We can

make do with these other tools, but they're not great."

The tool shop offered blades, armor, and tool repairs. In a big city, different shops would've split those services; out here in the sticks, though, one place took care of them all.

I was in the dark about what made a hoe preferable to other gardening tools. I figured the difference was clear if you'd worked with one for years, though.

"Our hoe's easy to use, and digs up dirt real quick," the old man added. "We didn't have to break a sweat to get things done. But without it..."

Hrm. I see why this is a problem. Tilling a field is tiring... Actually, it's exhausting. I sure hope this pair get their hoe back soon.

After chatting with the couple for a bit, I made my way back to the drugstore.

An absurdly loud, cannon-like sound erupted from the kitchen. *What the hell...?*

Peeking in, I saw Mina and Noela cooking.

"It's dangerous to chop too hard, Noela!"

"Not too hard, Mina. One-tenth of strength," Noela retorted proudly, knife in hand.

"Why do you look so proud?"

"Werewolves strong." Noela brought the knife down on the cutting board again.

Shthunk! The blade bent in half.

"Ah!" Mina cried. "See? I told you to be careful, Noela! You bent another knife. When Mr. Reiji finds out, he'll be angry."

"Please keep secret from Master, Mina," Noela whimpered. "Use extra knife. Master never find out!"

"You just *bent* the extra knife."

"Garoo?!"

"Now we can't cook," Mina added. "What're you going to do?"

“Groo...” Noela looked miserable.

Feeling sympathetic, I called, “I’m home! What’s up, ladies?”

The two turned toward me.

“Welcome home, Mr. Reiji,” said Mina. “I have something to tell you. Noela —”

“Master!” Noela hugged me tightly, tears in her eyes. “Mina upset!”

“That’s not true at all,” Mina interjected. “Mr. Reiji, Noela took the extra kitchen knife, and—”

“She bent it, right? I know. I was watching.”

Noela shuddered. “Master...upset?”

“Come on,” I reassured her. “I wouldn’t get mad over a knife or two.”

“Garrooooo!”

Noela wagged her tail rapidly. *Swoosh swoosh swoosh swoosh swoosh!*

“I can’t cook with this bent knife,” Mina sighed. “Could you buy me a new one, Mr. Reiji?”

Cooking was part of Mina’s chores—plus, we kind of needed to eat. I could see that this was an issue.

I nodded to Mina. “All right, I’m off.”

The general store carried knives, but since I wanted something extra sturdy, I headed to the tool shop. When I left, Noela tailed me; even though she’d attempted to hide the bent knife, she must’ve felt responsible.

The tool shop was unattended, and it didn’t have much stock. However, swords and spears lined the walls, and gauntlets, chest armor, and helms sat on a shelf.

“This good, Master!” Noela showed me the priciest sword, eyes glittering.

“Seriously? A sword? We’re not going on an adventure, Noela,” I chuckled. “We need something much smaller and more practical.”

Finding a well-priced knife that seemed easy to use, I decided to grab two.

Unfortunately, the shop owner was nowhere to be found.

“Um, excuse me!” I called. “I want to buy these!”

Thwack! A hand suddenly gripped the countertop.

Gah! What is this, a horror movie?!

To my surprise, a bespectacled, blue-haired girl poked her head up from behind the counter. Her eyes were bleary, and her glasses were barely on. She must’ve been pretty sleepy.

“Q-quiet down, would ya...?” she stammered, yawning wide as she stretched. “I was busy doing repairs, and I fell asleep on the floor before I knew it.”

She must’ve been working on the old man’s hoe.

“Ah, you!” the girl exclaimed. “You’re that alchemist everyone’s been talking about, right?”

“I’m a pharmacist, actually, but whatever.”

“I’m Paula. I’m in charge of this joint.”

I quickly shook Paula’s hand and then paid for the two knives. “Busy with repairs?”

“Dang busy. Oh, and by the way, that e-po you make? I drink one, like, every night. They’re lifesavers. Thanks!”

E-po? Oh...she must mean the drugstore’s energy potions.

So, Paula was staying up late *and* running the tool shop during the daytime. I could totally see why she’d nod off behind the counter.

“I was fixing the Red Cat Brigade’s armor, and then a bunch of local repair requests came in,” Paula added. “Ugh. I’m so sleepy.”

The Red Cat Brigade was Kalta’s main police force, so it made sense to prioritize them.

“How do you repair stuff?” I asked.

“Binding things together, soldering metal,” Paula shrugged. “Snapped iron is the most annoying thing. Fixing that is impossible, no matter what I do. I wish

people would just replace broken iron tools. Instead, they always come ask me to fix them. It takes forever.”

Paula was just one person, and obviously, she got tons of requests. It didn’t surprise me that stuff took a while to make it back into customers’ hands.

“Could you prescribe me something amazing, Rei Rei?” Paula asked.

“Rei Rei”? I haven’t been called that since I was a kid.

“You know,” she continued, “some liquid I can just dunk stuff into, and then—woosh! All fixed!”

“Sorry. I can’t create stuff like that. That’s more like magic. Wait...dunk?”

Dunk, dunk, dunk... I could make something that would help!

“I have an idea!” I told Paula. “Hold on.”

“Huh? For real?! I’ll hold on for as long as you want!” she gaped.

Noela was trying on armor and pretending to be an adventurer. *Whatever. As long as she’s not hurting anyone or breaking anything.*

I dashed out of the tool shop and holed myself up in the drugstore’s lab until I created a special liquid. Bottling the concoction, I made my way back to Paula’s shop. She was napping on the counter.

“Yo! Paula! Wake up. I’ve got something for you.” I shook her shoulder.

She raised her head and adjusted her glasses. “Hrmm? Wha...? You’re already finished? Um...I...uh...repair tools over here.”

Paula led me to a small back room lined with all kinds of tools. The room contained gauntlets in mid-repair and many other pieces of armor that she clearly hadn’t touched yet.

I called Noela, peeking back into the main store. Lo and behold, she was playing “heroine versus demon king” by herself. *I’ll just leave her alone for now.*

“These gauntlets have been a struggle,” Paula told me. “That cool, gorgeous Red Cat Brigade captain owns them.”

Captain Annabelle’s gauntlets had originally been red. After all the damage they’d sustained, however, their color had faded significantly. Honestly, I

thought the wear and tear made them way cooler. Still, it was clear even to me that one red iron plate was totally busted. Fortunately, it looked as though Paula had every piece of the gauntlet.

“We should be able to fix this quickly,” I told Paula.

“Really?”

“Yup. Watch this.”

I opened the bottle from my lab and dipped in a pencil. Carefully, I used the pencil to apply the sticky bottled liquid to a piece of plate, then reattached it to the gauntlet.

“You stuck it *back on*?! Wha—?! How? How?! That happened so fast! *Amazing!*”

Super-High-Strength Adhesive: Glues objects together. Tremendous stickiness.

The glue didn’t set instantly, but it would harden quickly if Paula left it alone for a while.

“Wha...?! But—hang on!” Paula cried. “This adhesive is useless if you can just pull the gauntlet apart.”

“Hold this for a sec.”

Handing Paula the gauntlet, I held the plate piece I’d glued on. Together, Paula and I pulled in opposite directions with all our strength.

“Grraaaaah!”

“Aaaaah!”

Our shoulders heaved as we tried to catch our breath.

“I-It’s not budging!” exclaimed Paula. “What the heck is this stuff? It’s amazing.”

“R-right?”

“My repair times are gonna shrink! Thank you so much, Rei Rei!”

“No problem,” I gasped.

Turning away, I realized the bottle of adhesive was missing. It didn’t take long to locate. Noela, still dressed in Paula’s armor, pulled apart her sticky index finger and thumb over and over.

Gloop. Gloop. Gloop...shtick.

“Garroo? Mm...mmm?!”

Come on. Don’t tell me...

Noela’s finger and thumb were stuck in an “okay” symbol. Noela flushed, using every bit of strength to pull her fingers apart. After trying and failing, she turned to me for help.

“Master. Big problem.”

“No kidding.”

We were getting in Paula’s way, so Noela and I left the workroom.

“I’m gonna swing by later to thank you, Rei Rei!” Paula called.

“Gotcha!”

“Master! Master! Fingers!” Noela grabbed my hand.

Gloop. Gloop.

“This is what you get for messing with stuff you don’t know anything about,” I began, wondering why my hand felt oddly warm. “Wait a second...*gloop?*”

It turned out that Noela’s trapped fingers were now stuck to *my* hand.

“Er...I can’t let go. Noela, please tell me you didn’t do what I think you did.”

“Can’t move,” Noela replied. “Master stuck, too!”

Why does she look so happy?! This makes me the adhesive’s second victim!

“Seriously?!” I groaned. “This means we’ll be stuck together during baths, toilet visits, and bedtime!”

“Arroooo! Together all the time, Master!” Noela’s eyes sparkled. Her tail

wagged happily.

“I’m gonna see *everything*, you know!”

Noela took a moment to think and then raised her “okay” hand.

Er...for real?

“Stop using that hand,” I told her. I was just going to have to make a glue remover.

Back at the drugstore, Mina had made dinner and was waiting for Noela and me. I’d handed her the kitchen knives when I dropped in to make the adhesive, so she cooked without issue.

“Welcome home, you two!” Mina exclaimed. “Look at you holding hands! What’s going on?”

“Stuck to Master,” Noela replied. “Bath, toilet, bed together!”

“Wha...?! Oh, no! B-bed together?! That’s lewd! It’s off-limits, young lady!”

“Not lewd. Person who thinks bed lewd is lewd. Mina most lewd.” Noela threw sass right back at Mina, who covered her face with her hands.

“What exactly were you just imagining, Mina?” I demanded.

“Mina think lewd stuff, Master!” Noela declared.

“Ah. That explains why she’s finger-pointing. She’s the lewdest of us all!”

“You’re both big meanies!” Mina yelled. Tears streaming down her cheeks, the “lewd” young woman stormed out.

Okay, maybe we took it a bit too far.

Obviously, I had no intention of staying stuck to Noela. I hastily created an adhesive remover and separated our hands with no trouble.

The next day, a bright-eyed, blue-haired girl showed up at the drugstore.

“I finally got a good night’s sleep thanks to you, Rei Rei!” she exclaimed. “Seriously, thanks!”

Who was this young woman? She wore a long, modest skirt and glasses.

“Wait,” I said. “Are you Paula...?”

“Yup! Don’t tell me you’ve already forgotten me! We just met yesterday!” She flashed a carefree smile.

So, this is how she looks dressed up. She’d seemed completely different when we first met; now, she had the vibe of an energetic big sister.



“Once you left, I finished jobs I thought were gonna take months!” Paula told me. “That adhesive you made is amazing—and so are you for making it!” She plopped down more than enough money for her purchases.

Just as Paula was about to leave, she added, “I’ll drop in again when I’m free.”

Could people stop killing time at my store?

“Hee hee! See ya!” She winked and vanished.

Since Paula had fixed the Red Cat Brigade’s armor, I was sure the older gentleman in the meadow had gotten his hoe back, too. I felt like I’d gone above and beyond, so I was in a great mood. Finishing some easy chores, I sat at the counter and greeted a customer. “Welcome!”

Kirio Drugs was open for business as usual.

Chapter 2:

They Never Make It to the Sticks

“I’M NOT SAYING they never pop up.”

“You aren’t?”

Paula apparently had nothing to do. She’d left her tool shop and wandered into the drugstore, where she was currently making me listen to her gripe.

“They drop in once in a blue moon.” She pushed up her glasses and sighed. “But they just take a quick look and leave. You can see that they aren’t crazy about the stock I carry here in the middle of nowhere.”

Paula was talking about adventurers. Unfortunately, she couldn’t do much to attract them, considering that her tool shop pulled triple duty as a weapon store and armor store. It just couldn’t compare to a big-city joint.

Mina poked her head in. “Ah, Miss Paula! Welcome.”

Paula waved. “You’re looking as ladylike as ever, Mina!”

I sighed. “You sound like an old man.”

Mina laughed and waved me off. “That’s fine, Reiji!”

“Come hang out with me for a bit,” Paula suggested.

“Could you please stop hassling my employees?” I rolled my eyes.

Mina, unsure of how to react to Paula, forced a smile. “Um, should I bring out some tea, Mr. Reiji?”

“Nah. Paula will head home soon.”

Mina bowed slightly and retreated.

“Don’t be like that, Rei Rei,” Paula pouted. “We’re both shopkeepers. We have plenty to chat about.”

“Not anymore. We’ve run out of small talk, since you drop in literally every day.”

“Know what? My joint’s got good stuff for sale, Rei Rei! Those adventurers just—”

“You’re gonna keep babbling?” I grimaced. “Must be nice to have so much free time.”

Paula paid me no mind, continuing to rant despite my tone. “If they looked properly, they’d find good equipment. But they don’t even bother!”

“That’s because your store is way too dark and cramped. Frankly, it feels like an antique shop.”

“What?! That’s not true! I make sure to polish all my merchandise!”

Even if she did, it wasn’t leaving a great impression. “Then you’re worse at upkeep than I thought.”

Then again, I’ve only been to Paula’s shop once. Maybe I’m misremembering things.

“Wanna come take a look?” Paula invited.

I’d have been lying if I said I wasn’t a bit curious after this conversation. I scratched my head and stood. “Mina? Noela? I’m dropping in on Paula’s place for a sec. Watch the store!”

“Garroo!”

“All right!”

Leaving Kirio Drugs, Paula and I made our way toward the tool shop.

“Can you really leave your shop completely unattended?” I asked. “What if a customer drops in?”

“Pfft. It’s fine. No one’s actually gonna come by.”

I was tempted to ask about thieves. Then again, this little backwater village was pretty safe. I hadn’t heard of a single disturbance besides that bandit issue a while back.

I followed the lackadaisical Paula into the tool shop. *Yup, just as I thought. She stuffed too much merchandise in here. And barely any light comes in the windows!*

“Way too dark,” I muttered. “That’s why adventurers leave immediately.”

“You think? I don’t know...this lighting seems perfectly normal to me.”

“You’re used to it. You’re always holed up in here.”

“I see.” Paula didn’t seem at all convinced.

Fine. Time to prove it to her. I repositioned some armor sitting in front of a window, allowing light to flood in.

“Whoa! It’s brighter in here, Rei Rei!”

“Right?” *Like I said, this place is way too dark.*

“I’m counting on you to clear the rest of the windows!”

“Excuse me?” I grabbed Paula’s collar as she fled. “You’re going to help.”

“‘Help?’ So, you’re going to clean up with me?”

“Gah. I should’ve kept my dumb mouth shut.” I sighed. “Considering the clutter in here, I bet your inventory’s a mess too, right?”

The two of us began tidying separate areas. “You know, I think I might need my own counter person,” Paula mused. “A cute girl, preferably. Someone like Mina.”

“I’m not giving you Mina.”

“Then how about little Noela? If I offered her a cool sword, I think she’d be interested.”

“Don’t bait her with presents. I know for a fact that it’ll work.”

Noela lived free as a bird. Could she actually put her nose to the grindstone in a store full of treasure? *Nah, impossible.* When I’d visited the tool shop with her, she played by herself the whole time.

“Noela’s off limits,” I told Paula. “I count on her in the woods. Plus, she perks me up.”

“Fine. I’ll settle for you, Rei Rei.”

She couldn’t phrase that better?

“‘Rei Rei’ is a shopkeeper,” I reminded Paula. “Please stop trying to recruit at

my drugstore. There's got to be some other place you can do that."

"That's the problem! There are no cute counter girls anywhere else!"

"If that's your criteria, why did you try to poach me?"

We kept talking shop while we organized Paula's inventory. The plan was to leave only the necessary products in the front, packing everything else away.

"See?" I asked eventually. "Doesn't it feel more spacious?"

"It really does! It's bright, too! Awesome. Now, time to clean up together! Woo!" Paula grinned at me.

"Woo!" I went along with her momentarily. *Damn it! She tripped me up again.*

Paula cackled. "Bwa ha ha!"

Letting out a sigh, I grabbed a broom and started sweeping the floor. Looking up for a moment, I noticed a piece of iron armor we'd left on display. It was definitely darker than it should've been. It had probably gone unsold for so long that it tarnished.

"Have you polished this properly?" I asked Paula.

"How rude! There's no dust on it, is there? I go over it with oil at least once a week."

"Once a *week*? Seriously?"

"Ah ha ha! Well, you saw how much inventory I have. Polishing all this stuff is hard, you know."

Polishing the armor wasn't the issue. When I looked carefully, I spotted some small dents. If Paula had taken care of this thing properly, it would've sold a long time ago.

"I can't keep stuff in mint condition when it doesn't sell," she insisted.

"What if you could?" I asked.

"Pardon?"

Thanks to my medicine-making skill, a new product had appeared in my mind. Paula and I might be able to make this armor look flawless.

“I’m heading back to the drugstore for a bit,” I told her.

“Huh? Why?”

“I have an idea. I’m gonna create something that’ll make that armor as good as new.”

“Really?! Alchemists can make stuff like that?! Amazing!”

“I’m not an alchemist,” I told the thunderstruck Paula, leaving the tool shop and heading home.

Mina and Noela shot me puzzled looks as I holed up in the lab without saying a word. I grabbed some herbs and roots I didn’t usually use, making a tree-sap base.

Polishing Solution: Gets rid of minor dents and wear and tear.

Perfect. I’d created exactly what I intended. Bottling the solution, I rushed back to Paula’s tool shop.

“Whoa. You’re already done?” she gaped.

I gave Paula a rag and poured a few drops of polishing solution onto it.

“Should I wipe the armor down with this?”

“Yup. Give it a try.”

“Uh...okay.”

One wipe. Two wipes. The rag made the iron armor squeak.

“Wha...? *Amazing!* It’s like new! Look, Rei Rei!”

Paula pointed at a spot that now shone light silver. The rest of the iron armor was still tarnished.

“Yup. That spot’s totally different,” I confirmed.

“This polishing solution is wicked! An incredible invention! This armor’s gonna be brand spanking new again!”

When Paula finished shining the armor, I took a close look and couldn't spot the dents from before.

"I think I can sell this, Rei Rei. Nobody will write off my shop anymore!"

"Well, I'm not sure you can avoid that given your selection, but..."

"Excuse me?!"

I pretended not to hear her. "I suppose I'll do some polishing, too."

I began shining one of the iron gauntlets on display. The polishing solution's transformative effect honestly made the process pretty fun. Paula and I wound up using it on all the goods in the store.

"I-It's super-duper bright in here! My inventory is legit crazy shiny, Rei Rei!"

"Paula, have you considered using more polished *vocabulary* when talking to potential customers?"

"Nah. Don't sweat the deets!"

The tool shop looked completely different. With nothing blocking its windows, the store was full of light, and all the merchandise shone radiantly.

Talk about an insane before-and-after. This kind of reminds me of those old DIY shows back in my world.

"Arrrooo! Master! Master! Sterma! Aterm! Master's tune!"

I glanced out the window and saw Noela walking over, singing a truly bizarre song. She must've gotten bored.

Entering the tool shop, Noela tilted her head. "Wrong store?"

She closed the door and left. The shop's transformation was so all-encompassing that she had decided she'd gotten lost.

"All right!" Paula enthused. "Things are gonna bustle around here! Time to get this party going!"

I dealt with her excitement and then, eventually, went home.

A week later, Paula dropped in to complain again.

“We gotta find a way to get more adventurers to visit Kalta, you know?”

“Hunh. We do?”

“Yeah. We should build a dungeon or something. I bet you could manage that, Rei Rei.”

“Like hell I could. What do you think pharmacists even *do*?”

“Travelers barely pass by to begin with.” Paula slapped her forehead, exasperated. “Of course I can’t sell equipment!”

I sighed.

Paula glanced at me. “You were just thinking about how annoying I am, weren’t you?”

“Hm? I’ve been thinking that for a while, to be honest.”

“Ah ha ha...huh?” Paula’s expression got serious. Her eyes went glassy, and her mouth gaped.

Heh. It was kind of funny, actually. “I’m kidding, for real. I promise I wasn’t thinking that you were annoying. And hey, *if* adventurers visit, I’m sure your stuff will sell.”

“Yeah. You’re right,” Paula muttered.

Moments ago, this bespectacled young woman had been her usual, bouncy self. Now I was comforting her, and it took quite a while to get her back to normal.

Note to self: teasing Paula like that doesn’t go well.

Chapter 3:

The Direction of Affection

I WAS TENDING to the drugstore as usual when Ririka dropped in for the first time in a while.

“Long time no see,” I said. “How’d the hunting festival go?”

“Thanks to your help, I won.”

“That’s great! Congrats. I heard from Noela that you came by to say thanks, but I haven’t had a chance to ask how you did. I’ve been wondering about it this whole time.”

“You have...?” Ririka turned away, fiddling with her hair.

She must be here to either complain about Kururu or ask for advice.

Paula apparently wasn’t dropping in today, so I gestured Ririka to the chair the other shopkeeper had stashed in my shop for her frequent visits.

“Ah. Thanks.”

Hrm. Ririka seems off. Is she feeling okay?

The elf girl sat across the counter from me. She refused to look me in the eye; I was just gazing at her profile. “Mina’s not here, is she...?”

“She’s out shopping with Noela.”

As long as Mina wore her brooch, she could leave the house freely, so lately she’d enjoyed going for walks or out shopping when she was done with the housework.

“I thought so. I...um...checked to see whether she was here before coming in,” Ririka said quietly.

Had something involving Mina happened to Ririka? Did they get into a squabble without my knowing? I doubted Mina would engage in that kind of thing.

“What brings you here today, Ririka?”

“I’d like to learn more about...Mina.” Ririka blushed.

“Mina? Why? Ah...”

I get it now. Ririka must’ve awoken to her true self, like her big brother had. This would’ve been too difficult to talk directly to Mina about, so Ririka was going through me, knowing that Mina and I were close.

Even Paula thought that Mina was adorable—although probably not in that way. The adventurers who’d come by the drugstore a while ago fell in love with her, too.

Talk about popular. It’s kind of ironic that Ririka really can’t complain about Kururu now, though. Picturing cute, ditzy Mina and beautiful Ririka together made for an image, that was for sure.

“Ask away!” I encouraged Ririka. “What do you want to know?”

“I’m not very good at housework,” she told me. “What about Mina?”

“Oh, she’s incredible! She can literally do anything. Plus, she’s amazing in the kitchen.”

“She is?” For some reason, Ririka looked downcast.

Was she thinking of making Mina sweets to earn extra points? I see. Ririka’s not very good at cooking, and now that she knows that Mina is, she probably thinks her homemade baking wouldn’t go over well.

“Don’t worry, Ririka,” I said. “If you put your heart into making something, it doesn’t matter how good a cook you are.”

“R-really?” Ririka’s expression brightened.

Awesome. I cheered her up.

“I forgot to ask something important,” Ririka continued. She stared straight at me. “Um, Reiji...what kind of relationship do you and Mina have?”

I understood why that would be one of the first things Ririka checked. I gave her a thumbs-up. “No worries, Ririka. Mina and I aren’t like that at all.”

“Oh, I see!” She glowed. “I figured you weren’t in that kind of relationship,

but it's just...you know, I've seen you two together...completely coincidentally! I didn't mean to or anything."

Yup, there's that calm, collected explanation.

"It's important to confirm this kind of thing," I reassured Ririka. "It's scary how easily people get caught up in misunderstandings."

"What're you grinning about? Hmph!" She turned away.

"Anything else you wanna know?"

"No. That's enough for today. I confirmed what I wanted to, so I'm satisfied. But..." Ririka cut herself off for a moment and then said, "I refuse to lose to anyone."

She refuses to lose, huh?

If the elf girl was aiming to win Mina's heart, she certainly had numerous rivals. I wondered how Mina felt about other women. Would she be interested in dating Ririka?

At the end of the day, that was Mina's issue to deal with. Besides, when Ririka gave her all, I couldn't help cheering her on, as I had during the hunting festival.

"You know what? I got this," I promised Ririka. "I'm going to transform you into the strongest, most beautiful elf the world's ever seen!"

"Really?! Thank you so much, Reiji!" Ririka exclaimed. "Wait...I feel like we're not on the same page. Maybe that'd be...over the top?"

Ririka was beautiful, but if she wanted to avoid losing to *anyone*, I'd support her. "Instead of covering up your weaknesses, I say we improve your strengths!"

"Oh...um...yeah. That sounds good."

I took a long look at Ririka. The beauty gel I'd given to Lady Flam was great for skincare, but I didn't think the elf girl needed it. "Your skin's so beautiful."

"What?!" Ririka backed away. "Gosh, what's the matter with you?!"

I closed the distance. "Your eyelashes are long, your eyes are big, and your eyebrows are thin."

“You’re too close, Reiji! Too close!”

The perfume I’d given Elaine, and the one Elaine gave to Noela, both had distinct scents that didn’t suit Ririka.

“Is there a scent you’re particularly fond of?” I asked her. Creating a perfume she disliked would make the whole thing pointless.

“Huh? Um...” She glanced at me and then quickly looked away. “M-medicinal odors.”



“Hunh. Odd favorite.”

Ririka sighed. “It’s less that I like those smells, and more that...”

She grew quiet; I couldn’t make out what she said at all. *What? Is she saying she’s not fond of medicinal odors?*

What else...? I washed my hair with whatever and called it a day, but hair was super important to girls, and Ririka’s was quite long. It was beautiful, but I bet it was a pain to maintain, since longer hair required more effort.

“You wash your hair and stuff, right?” I asked. “How much time does it take?”

“Why...? Um...about two hours.”

“What the hell?!”

“That’s not special. I think it takes most people about that long.”

Ah, right. People did use something resembling shampoo in this world, and if everyone thought that two hours was normal, nobody would complain about it.

“I’m going to go make something real quick,” I told Ririka. “I’ll help you up your game big time. Just wait and see!”

“Uh...okay.” Ririka’s reply was muted.

I left the elf girl behind and locked myself in the lab.

As production at the drugstore had revved up, I’d been stockpiling fruit extracts and plant oils. *Now that I think about it,* I mused, *Kalta’s locals might like lots of the ingredients I don’t care for.*

Shampoo: Cleans hair.

Hair Mask: Soaks into hair and repairs it. Moisturizes and gives bounce.

Conditioner: Adds shine to hair. Moisturizes hair ends.

Perfect. The prototypes are complete! I bottled the shampoo, hair mask, and conditioner. Heading back to the drugstore, I gave Ririka a simple lecture on using the stuff.

“Will these be enough to beat Mina...?” Ririka demanded.

Beat Mina?

Well, Mina did like playing with other girls’ hair. I’d seen her annoy Noela countless times.

“Your hair’s so smooth, Noela! And it smells delightful!”

“Stop smelling! Bad. Perv!”

“Noela! Come back!”

Was Ririka hoping to connect with Mina by impressing her with her beautiful hair and bonding over it? “Well, either way, you’ll spend a lot less time on your hair.”

“Hunh. Th-then I guess I’ll give these a try.”

“Awesome,” I replied. “Let me know what you think, okay? I might be able to improve them, and if they work well enough, I could sell them in the drugstore.”

Ririka twirled her hair, refusing to look me in the eye. “H-hey, um, R-Reiji... would you be happy if I got prettier?”

I mean, I’d be ecstatic if stuff from Kirio Drugs helped Ririka become even more beautiful. As a pharmacist, what I enjoyed most was seeing the happy faces of those I’d helped. “Of course!”

“I see...”

“I’m rooting for you!” I added.

Ririka’s face turned bright red. “Jeez! Wh-what’s that supposed to mean?!”

She dashed out of the store, her new shampoo, conditioner, and hair mask in her hands.

Ririka's Side

Ririka rushed out of town and back into the woods, fighting her mixed feelings.

“He’s ‘rooting for me’? What did he mean by that?! Seriously, my feelings are that obvious?! And if Reiji knows how I feel, does that mean he also l-likes... augh!”

Hurrying home, Ririka tried out the three-step haircare set immediately.

“Ah...my hair’s so smooth and shiny! Incredible!”

The haircare set worked wonderfully on the very first day the young elf girl tried it. Still, she was too embarrassed to tell Reiji, and it was a while before she made her way back to Kirio Drugs.

Reiji's Side

Ten days later, Ririka showed back up at the drugstore. “G-good day.”

“If you’re looking for Mina, she’s shopping.”

“I-I know. I made sure she’d be out before I came by.” Ririka stood in the drugstore entrance without stepping into the store. She crossed her arms, looking over at me.

What’s up? I wondered. *If she has something on her mind, she should... Hrm? Wait a sec.*

Ririka’s hair had always been beautiful, but it was on a whole different level now. It shone in the light, so smooth that a little wind tousled each and every strand.

Those breezes brought a delightfully sweet aroma my way. Since I’d picked the hair products’ scent, it shouldn’t have surprised me, but I couldn’t help feeling entranced. *That smell is mind-blowing.*

“Um, those treatments cut the time I spend on my hair in half, just like you said,” Ririka told me. “And it turned out really nicely.”

“I’m glad they were worth making!” I replied.

Ririka ran her hand through her hair. “Wh-what do you think?”

What does she mean? “Of your hair? It looks beautiful.” There was no way Mina could ignore her now. *She’ll definitely wanna sniff Ririka’s hair.*

“Oh...really? W-wow.”

That was all Ririka said. She stood at the store entrance and stared at her nails. It was awkward talking to her like that, so I motioned for her to sit.

She declined. “N-no...I’m fine right here.”

“Are you sure?” I asked. *Seriously, what’s up?*

As I pondered that question, Mina ran in.

“Hey, Mina!”

“G-good day, Mina,” said Ririka. “I-I’ll take my leave now.”

She exited the drugstore immediately, apparently still too embarrassed to talk to Mina face-to-face. Mina turned to watch her leave and then looked at me, seeming slightly out of breath.

“What’s up, Mina?”

“I forgot my wallet.” Mina turned around again, looking toward where Ririka had been a moment ago. “What brought Ririka here?”

Whoa! Mina’s showing interest in her! “She was giving me her thoughts on some new products and...uh...other stuff.”

“You’re acting mighty suspicious, Mr. Reiji.” Mina stared straight at me. “Are you hiding something from me?”

Panicking, I tried to change the subject. Backing away, I grabbed Mina’s wallet and handed it over.

“Great! Thank you very much.” Mina nodded and left.

I nodded back repeatedly as I watched Mina grow more and more distant. /

hope things work out for Ririka!

Chapter 4:

Company Retreat!

ABOUT A WEEK BACK, I'd raised the question of where to go on the drugstore company retreat. Since then, it was all anyone in the house had talked about.

However, the three of us lacked info on the outside world. Mina left the house for the first time in a hundred years just recently, Noela was Noela, and I didn't know jack about anywhere besides Kalta. I ended up talking to Zeral; I expected a rich guy to know what the best spots were. He recommended the port town of San Logro.

That brought us to now. I'd closed the drugstore for three days, and the girls and I left the house behind. Mina sat next to me during the carriage ride to our destination. She sniffled, holding her head in her hands.

"What's wrong, Mina?" I asked. "Feeling okay?"

"I just never thought this day would come! I'm so happy."

"You've been working super hard, so this is my way of saying thanks for everything. Come on, don't cry."

"I know, I know. I'm just so glad I'm alive!"

Actually, you're dead. I decided that I probably shouldn't point that out.

Noela must've overheard Mina. She pulled her face back from the carriage window, tail wagging. "Mina not alive."

"Oh, right—I'm dead. I'm so glad!"

Seriously?!

Our fun carriage journey ended after several hours, and we found ourselves in the port town of San Logro. The coast wasn't far; around San Logro, it was all just ocean.

"Master! Master! Smell ocean!" Noela wagged her tail quickly. She wore a small backpack.

“Yeah. It smells like the seashore.”

Entering San Logro, we discovered a bustling marketplace befitting a port town. All kinds of stalls sold rare fish and tools we’d never seen.

“It’s so lively here!” exclaimed Mina. She wore a wide-brimmed hat, and her white one-piece made her look like an heiress visiting her family’s summer resort.

The three of us headed to the dock to look at the boats. Over the course of the afternoon, we watched fishermen fillet a huge fish, ate sashimi, and enjoyed everything there was to enjoy in San Logro.

“I hear there’s a beach nearby, Mr. Reiji,” Mina told me.

“Oh, right. Zeral said something about that,” I replied. “Let’s go look tomorrow.”

We’d gotten to San Logro after lunch, so time really flew. We wound up eating dinner at a local tavern, ordering all kinds of seafood specialties. Noela barely held herself back as she devoured the array of food. *This is business as usual for her.*

“This fish is so delicious,” Mina cooed.

I heard a voice from directly behind us and listened in.

“Sister Birdra’s medicine is apparently amazing.”

“Who’s Sister Birdra?”

“You don’t know her? She’s a nun here on pilgrimage.” The voice added that Sister Birdra was working out of the local church.

“Oh, right. I’ve heard about her. She makes medicine that can heal anything.”

“Yeah. It’s kind of expensive, but I’m not sure you can put a price on a panacea.”

She makes a real cure-all?

“I think we should carry two or three of her panaceas at all times.”

“You’re probably right. Should we buy some?”

“Good idea. Sister Birdra’s still in town for now, but still, we should order them quickly.”

Maybe I should buy some, too, I reflected. *Food for thought. Heck, I might be able to replicate it.*

The sun set, and Mina, Noela, and I checked into a nice inn.

The next day, I made my way toward the church Sister Birdra was staying at. Since this was work, I sent Noela and Mina off to enjoy themselves. They were probably using their travel allowance to eat everything their hearts desired.

When I’d heard the word “panacea,” I couldn’t help thinking of ground dragon claws or secret elven medicine. *Wait. Why would a nun make medicine?* It was possible Sister Birdra did so using holy powers, given that my pharmaceutical skill seemed ripped straight out of fantasy novels.

As I headed toward the church, my ear caught a familiar voice. “What sort of fortune will you ask Sister Birdra to tell, Noela?”

“Compatibility with Master.”

“Oh! I’m interested in that as well. I’ve heard that she’s quite accurate!”

Noela and Mina were walking just ahead of me. What were they up to? Had Mina said “Sister Birdra” and something about fortunes? It wasn’t like I was tailing them, but I did end up keeping my distance from the pair. They made their way into the church, and I quietly followed, watching what they did from afar.

The church was dusty and didn’t look as though it was used much. Near the altar was a table where a nun—most likely Birdra—waited. From afar, I could tell that she was young, which surprised me. *She can make medicine and tell fortunes at that age?*

The good sister gestured for Mina to sit across from her.

“Your destined someone...is nearby,” she told Mina.

“Huh?!”

“They are, aren’t they?”

“Um...I-I don’t know.”

“Also, be careful. You might catch a life-threatening disease.”

“What?! What should I do?”

Um, Mina, you’re dead. I sighed. *Why are you freaking out? You have nothing to worry about.*

The nun said all kinds of things to Mina, who eventually picked up a paper bag and stood. “I’ll be fine if I drink this, right?”

“Of course. Good luck!”

“Good luck with what?”

The nun quietly ignored Mina’s question, moving on. “All right! Next!”

Noela sat. “Compatibility with Master, please.”

“Let’s see. Your master is a kind person.”

“Garoo!” Noela nodded, seeming terribly interested in how Sister Birdra had guessed that.

“Your compatibility with your master... Oh! It’s remarkably promising.”

“Remarkably...promising...” Noela nodded again, though she didn’t really seem to get the nun’s prediction.

“However, your master may catch an awful sickness soon.”

For real?

“Fear not,” the nun continued. “If you have him drink this panacea daily, he’ll be fine.”

Noela paid for the panacea and stood, her paper bag in hand. I guessed that was it for Sister Birdra’s fortune-telling. *She basically just says something super general that would satisfy anyone.*

Mina and Noela walked by, chatting. I panicked and quickly hid.

“When I get home, I’ll drink a little every day,” Mina declared.

“Make Master drink some daily!”

So, that panacea’s in their paper bags? Hrm...I’m getting a strange feeling from all this. I wasn’t religious, so I couldn’t help having my doubts about Sister Birdra. I didn’t know whether this world had a god, though. When the nun had finished fortune-telling, she’d said something about “going with God’s blessings,” whatever that meant.

Wait a second. Didn’t Mina and Noela come here to have their fortunes told? How’d they walk away with panaceas?

Whatever. I left the church and caught up with the girls. “Hey! What’d you ladies buy?”

“Ah, Mr. Reiji!” Mina exclaimed. “Are you already done with your work?”

“Yeah. I was looking into Sister Birdra’s panacea, and I happened to see you two buy some.”

Noela quickly presented me with her paper bag. “Drink some daily, Master!”

She seemed legitimately concerned about the fortune Sister Birdra had told. I patted her head gently, happy that she cared so much about my well-being.

This was a good chance to look into the supposed panacea. I opened Noela’s paper bag and found a packet of white powder.

“Master get sick,” Noela added. “Drink, no sick.”

“Um...Sister Birdra tells fortunes that often come true, so Noela and I both consulted her,” Mina added. “She said I’d get deathly ill, so I also bought some panacea.”

“No offense, but can you ‘get deathly ill’ when you’re already dead?”

“Gosh! You’re right!” Mina cried. “I’m such an airhead.”

I knew something was off. Sister Birdra was telling fortunes that applied to anyone and everyone. As long as a person was alive, the chance of falling ill one day was high. Birdra had told Noela something similar before selling her the panacea.

“How much did this stuff cost?” I asked.

“Um...the fortune was two thousand rin, and the medicine was ten thousand.”

If the white powder was a panacea, that wasn't a terrible price. But only if it was real. I looked at the stuff with my identification skill.

Flour: Made from ground wheat.

“Wait a second...it's just flour?”

I had Mina show me the panacea she'd bought. Sure enough, it was also ground wheat. *I knew something was fishy.*

“Mr. Reiji?”

“What wrong?”

“This isn't medicine,” I told the girls. “It's wheat flour.”

I had Mina open her bag and taste the powder. She cooked all the time, so she should understand immediately. “This *is* flour!” she exclaimed.

“Nun make mistake, Master!”

“We should go back and exchange these,” Mina added.

“I don't think this was a mistake.” It pained me to have to explain that to these two delicate souls. “I think Sister Birdra purposely sold you flour and lied about it being a panacea. She's scamming people.”

“But I also heard a rumor about her fortunes being accurate,” Mina protested. “Was that untrue as well?”

“The fortunes are based on something called the Barnum effect. The fortune-teller gives you a vague reading that could apply to anyone. It's easy to think it hit the mark.”

“In retrospect, Sister Birdra never gave me any details,” Mina said.

“Same,” Noela agreed.

“The panacea supposedly works wonders, right?” I continued. “That's called

the placebo effect. The person taking the stuff believes it's medicine, and their condition improves, even if there's nothing useful in it."

Rumors that Sister Birdra's fortunes were accurate just lent the placebo panacea more power. Besides, the source of the panacea was a nun; of course people wanted to believe her and the masses who vouched for her. That was more than enough to make someone buy in.

"Th-then the panacea works because people in San Logro completely believe in it?"

"Yup," I confirmed. "Sister Birdra's using the placebo effect to fool everyone."

Medicinal knowledge here seemed poorer than in my world. At Kirio Drugs, I sometimes heard stories that customers had visited the doctor for a condition, but they hadn't been able to treat it. I saw why people wanted to believe in Birdra's panacea.

"Mrm..." Noela looked frustrated. "Medicine fool people. Not good!"

"I completely agree, Noela," I replied. Sister Birdra was selling plain old flour as a miracle drug. As a pharmacist, there was no way I could let her get away with that. "I think it's about time for Kirio Drugs to dish out justice."

Another Side

A nun stood on an empty box in the port town of San Logro, waving both hands at passersby. "Attention! Attention!"

Once she had attracted onlookers, the nun continued in a gentle voice. "Sister Birdra is making an important announcement at the church. It won't take much time, so please head over!"

Quite a few people had stopped to listen, and most had interacted with Sister Birdra in some fashion—fortunes told, medicine purchased.

The nun hopped off the box. "Right this way! Come, everyone."

She led the way to the church, and about fifty people followed her. Turning

around once to confirm something, she exchanged glances with a black-haired youth at the very back of the crowd.

The nun nodded. *Perfect. Everything's going according to plan.*

Another Side

As Sister Birdra counted the previous day's sales, she heard a knock on the church doors.

Wham! Wham! Wham!

"What's going on? Why knock so loudly?" She stuffed the money she'd earned into a bag, clicking her tongue before standing up. "This church is abandoned. They can just come in."

Her complaint echoed through the large, empty nave.

Birdra had earned more than enough in San Logro. Before the day was over, she'd move on to the next town. If she stayed until people figured out that her panacea was a sham, it'd be too late.

Sister Birdra was hoping she could avoid any hassles today, but that seemed to be a lost cause. She opened the door, only to find a black-haired young man cradling a beastling.

"You're Sister Birdra, right?! Help us! My girl...sh-she's been unconscious since this morning!" He gazed down at the beastling. "I heard the town doctor's no good! You're the only one I can count on."

"I understand. Come this way." Sister Birdra put on her best serious expression, guiding the young man in.

There was but one thing she would do, however. She reached into her bag, pulled out a packet of flour, and turned back to the young man, smiling. "This panacea should help her."

"Oh my gosh—bless you! Will this save her?!" The young man stared at the nun.

She continued to smile, nodding. "Yes. However, I don't have much left, and it's quite a valuable medicine. Sadly, I cannot give it to you for free."

"O-of course not! How much is it?"

The young man looked as though he was fighting tears, which tickled Birdra's sadistic heart. Under the circumstances, she might as well rip him off. She would have to hire several bodyguards after leaving town, so she decided to charge enough to cover their fees. "Thirty thousand rin."

"Th-that much? Um...I heard you sold it for ten thousand."

"That was because I still had plenty in stock." Sister Birdra smiled. Gracefully denying the man's words was her way of asking him to leave.

"But I only have ten thousand rin!"

The nun was exasperated, yet she closed her eyes apologetically. "I'm so sorry, but I can't go lower than thirty thousand...and people in the next town await my arrival."

"Then just give me ten thousand rin worth of the medicine! Please!"

How sad. He could get plenty of flour from the marketplace! A smile slipped through. "I will. I understand."

"Thank you so much!"

What a fool, Sister Birdra thought. She collected his money and then gave him a spoonful of "panacea."

Knock, knock, knock.

The sound came from behind the altar. The young man's gaze sharpened as he looked over. Birdra tilted her head, puzzled, and then noticed that the man was already feeding the beastling girl the flour.

"Will she be okay now?" he asked.

"Of course. As long as you believe in God, she'll be fine," Birdra said, annoyed that she'd already spent way too much time on this pair.

"Heh."

Sister Birdra thought she heard the young man chuckle, but his expression

was clearly serious. He wouldn't have laughed in this situation, anyway. She must've misheard him.

"Will she awaken soon?" he added. "Or does she need to keep taking more panacea until she's better?"

Each question further irritated Sister Birdra. Pulling back her veil and scratching her head, she let out a long, built-up sigh.

She'd made enough money to live comfortably for a while. Even if some folks saw through her lies, rumors wouldn't travel as long as she went far enough away.

"Are we done here?" she snapped, her voice echoing through the abandoned church. "I need to get going. Look, the medicine you wanted *so badly* is just some stupid flour. Got it? Ah ha ha ha ha! Surprised? How does it feel to be so *stupid?!?*"

The once-kindhearted nun had turned cruel and foulmouthed. However, to Birdra's confusion, the man didn't seem remotely surprised.

"Flour?" he repeated. "Then you've been selling a fake cure-all?"

"Damn right! Old wheat flour I bought on the cheap in another town! Just saying I was a nun made all you idiots come buy it off me, and you were so grateful. Hell of a business!"

"Th-then the panacea doesn't have any healing effects?"

"It must have some. If it doesn't, that just means you didn't believe hard enough!"

"This can't be! You've been tricking everyone in town?!" the man cried.

Sister Birdra shouted too, enjoying the back and forth. "It's their fault for being idiots. Gah ha ha ha ha!"

As she chortled, the door behind the altar opened.

A blonde nun pointed at the pair. "There you have it, everyone! Sister Birdra's announcement today!" The host of villagers behind her looked enraged.

"H-huh?" gaped Sister Birdra.

The black-haired young man chuckled. “Sorry! Heh heh... I’m glad we took care of this so quickly. I knew from the start that the ‘panacea’ was flour. But since everyone totally bought into it, they’d have dismissed me if I warned them. The fastest way was for you to convince them yourself!”

He patted the beastling’s shoulder; she quickly opened her eyes. “Done, Master?”

“Yup. Brilliant performance, Noela.”

Sister Birdra ground her teeth. “Rat bastard! You planned to trick me from the start?!”

The young man snorted. “Who’s the one who said ‘it’s their fault for being idiots’?”

One by one, angry townsfolk came out from behind the blonde nun.

“I think you owe us an explanation!”

“And, depending on what you say, we may haul your butt off to the knights!”

“Give back our money! All of it!”

Surrounded, Sister Birdra shrugged. “Er, about your money...I already spent it all, so...”

“The cash is in that bag over there!” The young man pointed, drawing everyone’s gazes.

“*Stop!* That’s my money, my everything! Even what I earned in other towns! Please, I’ll refund you, I swear!” Sister Birdra fell to her knees, defeated.

The young man patted her shoulder, waving the ten-thousand-rin bill he’d paid her. “Lying isn’t going to get you anywhere.”

Before leaving with the beastling girl and blonde nun, he turned to look at Birdra one last time.

“When I first heard about your so-called panacea, I thought something was up. There shouldn’t be anyone around who can make something like that—other than me, that is. It’s best not to underestimate medicine making.”

Reiji's Side

In the end, San Logro's knights jailed Birdra. When they investigated, we found out she wasn't a nun—just a swindler with zero connection to the church. The truth became clear by dinnertime, and the entire town was discussing it.

The girls and I were back at the inn, relaxing. Until a few moments ago, Noela had been dangling her feet on my bed; now she was fast asleep.

"So," Mina inquired, "Miss Birdra wasn't a nun at all?"

"No. But she was clever, that's for sure," I replied. "Calling herself *Sister* Birdra made her seem trustworthy."

"Ah. Now that you mention it, that's true."

"Anyway, I'm glad we stopped her little black-market business."

"We have your amazing performance to thank for that, Mr. Reiji!"

"Please. You exaggerate."

Mina sighed. "We're heading home tomorrow."

"Shame we wound up spending a whole day on this nonsense," I replied. "I could always extend our stay, though."

She shook her head, smiling. "I'm more than satisfied with our company retreat, Mr. Reiji. Besides, we have all the time in the world to do this again."

"You're right. We'll have to come back to San Logro together." I returned Mina's warm grin.

Chapter 5:

The Extra-Large Challenge

THE OTHER DAY, Paula—the owner of the tool shop—swung by Kirio Drugs.

“Jeez, it’s been so hot lately,” she griped, crossing her arms on the counter. “I feel really slow and heavy! Am I sick? It’s literally like this every summer.”

Paula didn’t look sick, and she was as energetic as always, so I just handed her a regular energy potion.

“I have no appetite lately,” she continued. “If I eat the usual amount, I end up feeling gross. But this happens every year, so I don’t really give it too much thought.”

The next day, Captain Annabelle visited and said something similar. The drugstore didn’t sell products for appetite, so I told her to eat as much nutritious food as she could without overdoing it.

It would’ve been awesome if Kalta had a town doctor, but the local clinic was always vacant, so the symptoms continued. I heard rumors that the area’s physician was tending patients in another town.

The day after Annabelle’s visit, Elaine stopped by. “Every time I’m with you, Sir Reiji, my body temperature gets rather high,” she said, her face bright red. “It’s been quite a problem.”

Later, Ririka dropped in and said something similar.

“Are you doing okay, Ririka?” I’d asked her. “Do you think you might be getting sick?”

“M-me? Um...I guess you could say that,” she admitted. “I’m feeling a little odd.”

“I knew it.” I nodded. “Recently, everyone’s saying they lost their appetite, or they’re bloated, or they’re feverish.”

“Um...I feel like we’re talking about different things.”

“Huh? What’s up?”

“Oh...it’s n-nothing. Nothing at all.”

I spoke to Zeral and the general-store manager, Alf, plus the farmers. None seemed to be having issues. *It’s just the women?*

Around dinnertime, I decided to ask Mina and Noela. “Have you girls been feeling all right? Paula, Ririka, Elaine, and Annabelle are kind of off lately.”

“No problems!” exclaimed Noela, happily chowing down on her meal. She did strike me as the type not to get sick.

“Well, it’s been quite hot,” Mina pointed out. “It makes sense that they wouldn’t feel well.”

“Er...why?”

“I don’t know the reason, but even I lose my appetite during the summer. It’s kind of a natural diet, so that’s nice. But I also struggle to work up the energy to do things. Tee hee!” Mina forced out a laugh.

I looked at her plate. As she’d said, her serving was much smaller than usual. *Loss of appetite among girls and women during the summer...*

“Ah!” I exclaimed. “This has got to be summer fatigue!”

Noela and Mina looked at me blankly. “What’s that?” Mina asked.

“Dehydration and indigestion are common during summertime due to the temperature. You lose your appetite, space out, and feel slow.” I’d heard that summer fatigue was especially common among menstruating women. “But why does it happen?”

Mina tilted her head. “Why are you asking me?”

Isn’t it obvious? “I’ve never experienced it,” I replied.

“Huh? Really? I always thought everyone went through this!” Mina exclaimed. “I don’t have an answer for you, Mr. Reiji.”

“Master! Master! Also don’t know,” Noela added.

“I figured.”

I was guessing that the women with summer fatigue would eventually catch colds or something. If you couldn't eat much, your stamina dropped fast, and summer colds sucked. Getting sick wouldn't hamper Paula much, but Annabelle was Kalta's security. If she didn't have the energy to fight, that would be a problem.

The next day, I took Noela to the forest to collect ingredients. Even with all the shade, the temperature was quite high, so we took breaks by the cold river as we foraged. I planned to create a new product that was less a medicine, more of an herbal remedy.

We got back to the drugstore sweating bullets, and I immediately started mixing the herbs we'd picked.

"Arroo..." Noela was cuddling me, and her fur was genuinely suffocating. This was the one time I wished she wouldn't nap on me.

I did my best to move away from her and finally finished the new product.

Rikkuntoushi: Corrects bowel movements. Improves appetite.

I'd have everyone suffering summer fatigue try this, I decided. I brought a bottle into the kitchen.

"Hey, Mina! I made some herbal medicine that should help your appetite. Give it a try."

Mina had a pained expression. "Help my appetite? I'd, um, rather not take it."

Well, that's rare. Mina had never refused to try one of my creations. "Why not?"

"Your treatments work too well, Mr. Reiji. I'm a little worried that you're messing with me."

"I'm not, I promise. What if you get sick? This morning, you could barely eat breakfast."

I didn't know whether ghosts could catch colds, but Mina had a physical body,

so I wouldn't have been shocked if she did.

"Well, yes, but..."

Noela drew close and poked Mina's abdomen. "Mina."

"Yes?!"

"Safe!"

Mina sighed and rubbed her stomach. "I wouldn't want to cause you and Noela trouble by catching a bug, Mr. Reiji, so I'll take the medicine."

"Glad to hear it." I handed Mina the rikkuntoushi.

Then I heard Paula's voice from the store. "Rei Rei? Your favoritest lady friend is here! I walked all the way to Kirio Drugs in this heat just to see you, hon!"

"Since when did she become my favoritest lady friend?" I muttered. *Still, perfect timing.* I could give her the rikkuntoushi.

When I headed to the storefront, I saw Paula, Annabelle, and even Kururu.

"Wow, you're all here," I said. "Great! Paula, Annabelle, this new medicine I just finished helps with appetite loss. If you're feeling bloated, it probably has to do with your appetite."

"Wow!" exclaimed Paula. "You really went out of your way."

"And we didn't even request it," Annabelle added. "Thanks a lot."

"Quite a few folks had similar symptoms, so it made sense to concoct something."

Paula laughed. "Rei Rei, dear, this is the kind of moment when you should say something like, 'I made it just for you.' You'd earn bonus points."

"For what?" I handed the bottles over.

Paula and Annabelle immediately gulped down the rikkuntoushi.

"I haven't seen you in so long, Reiji baby," Kururu interjected. "Don't you have some for me?"

"You're not suffering summer fatigue." I rolled my eyes. "Eh, whatever. Might as well play it safe."

I gave him the last bottle; he gulped his down, too. The three rubbed their stomachs.

What's wrong? I wondered. *Don't tell me the rikkuntoushi made them nauseated.*

Rena, the Rabbit Tavern's barmaid, entered the drugstore. "Hey, Mr. Pharmacist!"

"Yo."

Rena handed me a single piece of paper. On it was a skillful drawing of an enormous plate of pasta—about twenty servings. Underneath that, I read, "The Extra-Large Challenge! First guest to finish wins ten thousand rin!"

I raised an eyebrow at Rena. "Is this what I think it is?"

"Yup! Dad said that events like this would be fun. I came here to tell you and the others about it."

"Hunh. An eating challenge, eh? Ten thousand rin..."

Eating twenty servings of pasta was impossible for me. And according to the flyer, if you didn't finish the Extra-Large Challenge in under thirty minutes, you had to pay a penalty fee of five thousand rin.

"How about it, Mr. Pharmacist? Care to participate?" asked Rena.

"Nah. I'd just blow it."

Swoosh!

Annabelle swiped the flyer out of my hands. Paula and Kururu peeked at it over her shoulders. Paula, the constant goof, had a stern expression; Annabelle was practically salivating. Mina also stared at the flyer. She gulped. Apparently, she'd heard Rena's explanation as well.

As for Kururu, well, he had his cleft chin back. *Why? How? Seriously?!*

Everyone looked preposterously focused. They raised their heads to gaze at Rena, chorusing, "We're in."

"Really?" I hesitated. *Is this because of the rikkuntoushi? None of these four is a big eater. Are they gonna have to pay the penalty fee?*

“I’ll go let Dad know!” Rena dashed away.

“Can you really eat that much, Mina?” I asked. “An extra-large serving in under half an hour?”

“Silly question, Mr. Reiji.” Mina sure sounded confident.

The others nodded, equally certain, and exited the drugstore. I tailed them, worried.

At the Rabbit Tavern, I saw four plates already piled with pasta. There were different sauces in different spots on each plate—pepperoncini, Bolognese, carbonara, and a ton of others.

Those seriously look delicious.

The four diners took their seats, and the tavern’s bear-like owner came out holding an hourglass. “You have thirty minutes!” he exclaimed.

I gulped. *Why am I the one getting nervous?*

“You may begin!”

He flipped the hourglass over. Mina, Annabelle, Paula, and Kururu immediately grabbed their forks and dug into their mountains of pasta.

Slurp! Slurp! Slurp! Slurp!

They focused completely on devouring their respective feasts. I was pretty sure I’d seen something like this on TV. *That’s right—Food Fight!*

The Rabbit Tavern was getting loud, and onlookers now surrounded the four diners. The Red Cat Brigade mercs were all there to watch Annabelle.

“If you eat like that, nobody’ll want to marry you, Boss!” one cried.

“Shut up!” Annabelle yelled.

“There’s a cash prize?!” one merc exclaimed. “I see—you’re goin’ through all this so you can feed us the good stuff!”

“You got this, Boss!” The mercs cheered.

In the midst of that yelling, I heard children. “You can do it, Paula!”

I recognized four neighborhood kids Paula played with a bunch. She waved

one hand at their warm cheers.

“I believe in you, adorable Mina!”

A group of middle-aged men were rooting for my live-in ghost. Mina really had become something of an idol among Kalta’s old dudes.

One sketchy-looking guy breathed heavily. “Are you having money problems, dear Mina? Can you afford food? I-I’d do anything to help you. Just ask, okay?”

Needless to say, Mina wasn’t broke. Still, this was the first time I’d ever seen her completely ignore everything around her.

Unfortunately, nobody was present to support Kururu. We locked eyes; he winked at me. *Ah, crap. Nope, not cheering for you. Sorry.*

The elf touched his cleft chin, tilting his head. He looked as though he wanted to say, “Hrm, how odd. What’s off with my chin today?”

None of the four had even said a word about the Extra-Large Challenge’s cash prize, although they’d zeroed in on the flyer like hungry animals.

Well, now they’ve zeroed in on their pasta. I gave them the rikkuntoushi to prevent summer fatigue, so why’re they participating in this challenge...? I mused. *Wait! I get it! Their eyes have gotten too big for their stomachs! They’re not here to win at all—they’re here to eat!* I’d finally solved the mystery.

Paula collapsed, tipping her chair over. *Swoosh.*

“I can’t eat anymoore!” she cried.

The other three looked agonized. Kururu’s hands weren’t even moving. Upon further inspection, he was completely unconscious. Judging by how much pasta he’d eaten, he’d probably conked out before Paula.

Annabelle and Mina were the only competitors left. *Slurp! Slurp!*

Annabelle glanced at Mina. “Y’know, I’ve always wanted to ask why you’re holed up at Reiji’s place.”

“None of your business. However, it must be very tiring for *you* to wake up early every morning just to see Mr. Reiji!”

“That’s not why I visit the drugstore!”

Both women had their cheeks packed with food like hamsters. *Damn. This is impressive.*

“You look like you’re in pain, sweetie,” Annabelle snickered. “I’m only half full!”

“Oh,” Mina retorted. “Well, I’m only 30 percent full.”

“Whoops! My bad. I’m only 20 percent full.”

“I misspoke too. I’m only 10 percent full.”

They’re arguing about it?! The two were clearly in over their heads.

“Unnngh,” Mina and Annabelle groaned in unison. They face-planted onto the table at exactly the same time.

I figured this’d happen, I reflected. And they left 40 percent of the pasta.

“That’s a wrap!” exclaimed the Rabbit Tavern’s owner.

In the end, nobody finished the Extra-Large Challenge, and all the challengers coughed up five thousand rin. The tavern staff enjoyed the leftovers.

The middle-aged creeps were lurking near Mina, who was so stuffed she was immobile. I picked her up and carried her home.

“My tummy hurts, Mr. Reiji,” she whimpered. “Having an appetite is scary. I completely forgot myself!”

“You were basically a different person,” I agreed.

“I’m happy I get a piggyback ride, though.”

“Hey, now. I’m not an ambulance.”

“Well, you always dote on Noela,” Mina pointed out. “It’d be nice if you doted on *me* every once in a while!”

Jeez, fine. I shuffled back to Kirio Drugs.

The rikkuntoushi prototype had worked way too well, so I diluted the herbal treatment before selling it in the drugstore. Needless to say, I put a warning label on it: “Beware of overeating.”

Chapter 6:

Tomato Madness

“AAH! Field work sure takes a lot out of you!” Mina stood up straight and stretched her arms high. She was wearing pants today, which was rare. She looked like she’d married a farmer or something.

Before we’d left to weed the meadow, Mina had donned her straw hat and put on trousers, saying, “When in Granad, do as the Granadians do!”

“Yup,” I responded generically as I crouched and weeded the ground next to her.

Mina adjusted her hat and knelt again. “Do you think Noela will be all right by herself at the drugstore?”

“Well, if I keep treating her with kid gloves, she’ll never learn to be responsible.”

Leaving Mina at the store and bringing Noela to the field did make the most sense. However, Noela absolutely hated the smell of the animal repellent in the meadow, so this was how it had to be.

After pulling the weeds, we watered the herbs that remained in the field.

“Grow up strong! Become useful little herbs!” Mina grinned.

“You seem to be having fun.”

“Ah ha ha ha! I don’t have much experience doing chores outside,” she explained. “When I was alive, I wasn’t your usual energetic child. I was terribly ill.”

“I see,” I replied. *A sickly Mina is hard to imagine.*

Splash! Mina continued to water the plants nearby. Meanwhile, I harvested the ones that were ready. We grew all kinds of things here, including ingredients for healing and energy potions, deodorizer fluid, and dishwashing soap. It was nice not heading to the woods for everything.

Thanks to my medicine-making skill, none of these herbs would die as long as I took care of them properly. Still, I really needed to thank Zeral for lending us this meadow.

After I'd harvested some herbs, I noticed a group of farmers sighing nearby.

"This might be trouble."

"They're growin' weak."

"Is something wrong?" I asked them. I knew these gentlemen fairly well.

When they noticed me, they greeted me warmly.

"You see, Mr. Reiji, I'm fertilizin' and all, but these just won't grow right," one farmer explained. "Wonder why not?"

I followed his line of sight. Several lush green plants grew thickly in the field. They'd blossomed, but hadn't produced any fruit. Apparently, if things went well, they'd grow tomatoes.

"I wish I could help, but I have no idea what the problem is," I admitted.

"I've been at this a long time, so I can tell at a glance that I won't get many tomatoes this year," the farmer explained. That meant he'd have fewer to sell.

When it came to raising crops, things sometimes just didn't pan out. That was literally a matter of life and death for the farmers. It wasn't like you could wave off the harvest and go, "Well, nothing I can do about it."

I knew for a fact that these farmers slaved over their crops, so the lack of tomatoes really stank.

"Hmm," I muttered. "The more tomatoes, the better...but I can't do much about the weather."

"Something the matter, Mr. Pharmacist?"

"I was just thinking that I might be able to help."

"Really, lad?!" The farmers latched on to the hope as if they'd seen God in the field or something.

I chuckled. "I'm just a novice farmer, so I'm counting on you guys to point me in the right direction."

After we'd discussed the situation with the tomato plants, I had the farmers teach me what to focus on while growing vegetables and how the cultivation process worked.

Yeah. Just like I figured, I can use my own crops and the ingredients in the laboratory to whip something up.

"Are you going to make a new medicine, Mr. Reiji?" Mina inquired.

"Sort of! How'd you know?"

"Hee hee! I could tell by your face. You look like you're having fun."

"Do I?" I was surprised. "I'm going back to the drugstore."

"Right! Good luck!" Mina waved as I headed into town.

When I arrived home, Noela was sitting behind the counter, looking bored as heck. "What wrong, Master? Field done?"

"No, not quite. I'm here to make a treatment. Thanks for watching the store."

Noela followed me back into the laboratory. *Eh, whatever. Things didn't look busy in the drugstore.*

"What treatment?" she asked.

Oh, right. Noela hates tomatoes! I grinned at her. "Something to make growing tomatoes easier."

"Garrooo?! M-Master, tomatoes no good!" She shook her head. Noela refused to eat tomatoes, no matter what Mina and I said. "All tomatoes rot!"

"Come on. Don't be like that." I nudged her. *She must see me as some mad scientist helping her mortal enemies.*

Noela watched me carefully as I worked, clearly on her guard.

Tomatox: Stabilizes germination, ripening, and growth of produce. Not dangerous to humans.

All right! It's done. I think the farmers can expect some tasty tomatoes!

Apparently, they could even use the tomatox on other crops.

“No good!” Noela exclaimed, blocking the lab exit. “If need, stop Master myself!”

“I see. That’s too bad, Noela.”

“Arroooo! Won’t lose to Master!”

“No more potions for you, I guess. At least, not for free. You’ll have to use your allowance from now on. You get three hundred rin per week, so I guess you’ll be able to buy one potion a month.”

Sweat began to stream down Noela’s face. She quietly moved out of the way.

Seems like free potions every day justifies tomato proliferation. I chuckled. *I’ve got nothing to fear from Noela.*

Taking several bottles of tomatox, I headed back to the meadow.

“Hi!” I called to the farmers. “Sorry for the wait!”

“Not at all! If anything, you were fast,” said one. The others nodded.

I handed him the bottled tomatox. “With this, you should have your usual tomato harvest!”

“Just by spreading this stuff around...?”

Using too much tomatox could damage the crop, so I told the farmers only to sprinkle a little. They seemed doubtful, narrowing their eyes at the bottles.

“Using it or not is up to you,” I assured them.

“We’ll use it, Mr. Pharmacist. We won’t be able to harvest any tomatoes at this rate. Anyhow, you went and made this just for us.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I’m looking forward to eating fresh tomatoes.”

“You got it.”

That was how I formed a tomato co-op with the farmers, who spread the tomatox immediately. Needless to say, the crop wouldn’t exactly grow overnight, so we’d just have to see what happened.

The next day, I asked Mina to pick some medicinal herbs for me. When she

came back, she seemed surprised. “The meadow was all overgrown, Mr. Reiji.”

“Don’t tell me it became a jungle or something overnight.”

I left the drugstore to Noela and Mina so I could go check.

Near the meadow, I spotted three adventurers talking.

“It’s a brand-new dungeon, here in the middle of nowhere!” one said.

“There’s no telling what danger lurks. Be careful, team.”

“N-no way,” I muttered. *I mean, it’s not like there couldn’t be a dungeon here. And of course adventurers would try to clear it.*

My cold sweat wouldn’t stop flowing. *My products always work too well, so I made a point of being careful this time. A jungle couldn’t have sprouted overnight.*

“Ha ha ha!” I laughed loudly as I walked. “No way.” Where was I? The forest?

Wait. This is the fence I put the repellent on. Which means... “The meadow’s a jungle?!”

The adventurers from before entered the field.

“Let’s do this,” one muttered.

“Yeah!”

They’re trying to explore?! “Um, this is just a meadow!” I yelled as they hiked out of view. “There’s no treasure or monsters!”

After thirty minutes, the adventurers still weren’t back.

“A-all right. I guess I’ll head in,” I muttered, lurching forward. “There are no monsters. I mean, th-there can’t be any! My repellent’s the best there is! If there *are*, they’ve got no chance.”

I heard sounds within the greenery. *What is that?!*

Inching closer, I found the farmers and their wives pruning away the foliage.

“Hey!” I called. “Things have gotten crazy, huh?”

“Oh! Hey there, Mr. Pharmacist! They sure have,” an old farmer guffawed. “I didn’t think the tomatox would work this well.”

“What’re you all doing?” I asked.

“Well, if we don’t prune the tomatoes, the other veggies won’t get any sunlight, will they?”

“These are tomato stems?” I panicked as I confirmed that I was the source of the problem. “I’m so sorry! I meant to make the tomatox weaker than usual. I must’ve messed up!”

A farmer patted my shoulder. “Look at this, Mr. Pharmacist.” He pointed at a large red pumpkin sitting in the dirt.

“What is it?”

“A tomato.”

“*Nani?!* ” I was so freaked out, I switched to Japanese. “Are you sure that isn’t a pumpkin?”

“Take a bite. Here.” One of the farmer’s wives handed me a huge tomato slice.

I bit into it. “Ah! This *is* a tomato...and it’s as sweet as a strawberry! It’s delicious!”

“This is downright amazing, Mr. Pharmacist! Sweet tomatoes at a size we’ve never seen—these’re gonna sell big!”

The other farmers and their wives happily nodded. Apparently, they’d all borrowed cash from Zeral when they rented this land. They were overjoyed that they could pay him back and turn a profit.

I helped prune the tomato stems, reverting the “jungle” to its proper “meadow” state, and received one of the big tomatoes as a thank-you gift.

I hope the adventurers got home okay.

When I brought the tomato home, Mina tasted it immediately. “It’s delicious! Oh, wait. Maybe...”

“Yeah, I had the same idea.” We nodded at each other.

At dinnertime, we carted out the big tomato, infuriating Noela.

“Could you at least take a bite? It’s tasty.” I used that specific word to remind

her of her beloved potions.

“Tasty?” Noela narrowed her eyes and took a bite. “Garroo! This tomato?”

“Yup!”

“No. Don’t like tomato.” She kept eating with no problems.

Mina sat across from her with a big smile. “I’m so glad you can eat tomatoes now! Good girl.”

I patted Noela’s head.

Afterward, word of Kalta’s huge tomatoes spread through the nearby towns. They sold like crazy thanks to their sweetness. I diluted the tomatox and then sold it at the drugstore. It wound up being popular among farmers, since it was famous for producing big tomatoes.

Chapter 7:

Drills's Teen Angst

AFTER MINA, NOELA, AND I got back from our company retreat, Zeral and Paula got back on their usual pattern of swinging by the drugstore to chat most days. Kururu and Ririka also dropped in often.

Today, though, Elaine was the one who popped up, butler in tow. "Good day, Sir Reiji."

"Good day to you," I said. "Noela's napping right now, if you need her."

Noela typically slept for two hours after lunch—on my bed, no less.

Elaine giggled. "No, no. I'm here to see you today."

"Huh? Me?" *Does she need my help with something?*

I motioned for Elaine to take a seat. She elegantly did so.

"What's up?" I asked. "I doubt you want to work at the drugstore or make medicine again."

My teasing tone made Elaine pout. "I'm here to talk to you about my father."

"Lord Valgas?"

"Correct. Recently, any time I go near him, I smell something awful."

"Is he taking baths?"

"He is, I believe. It's different from that sort of smell, though." Elaine struggled to find the right words.

This sounds like that stereotypical situation where a girl's like, "Gosh, Dad, don't do my laundry with yours, you'll stink it up!"

"P-pardon me." Elaine approached with a shy expression. She turned to me and sat herself on my knees.

Whoa—she's close. And she's still wearing perfume.

“Wh-when I was little, Father would hold me like this. But now, when I get near him, I smell something absolutely unpleasant.”

She brought her nose near me and sniffed. “You have a rather delightful scent, Sir Reiji. I suppose men don’t smell exactly the same. Oh—I’m so sorry. How brazen of me.”

“No worries, it’s fine.”

I patted Elaine’s head and heard what sounded like smoke erupting from her ears.

“M-my word, Sir Reiji! I’m not a child, you know.” Despite her annoyance, Elaine didn’t move from my knees. Her fingers twirled her proud, drill-like curls.

When teenage girls began to hate the way their fathers smelled, it was just a natural response. It was understandable that Elaine would ask me to erase Lord Valgas’s odor, but making him scentless wouldn’t be an easy task.

I told her I needed to think about it, sending her home.

The usual butler swung by the next day. “My lord has called for you, Sir Reiji. Could you accompany me to the Valgas estate?”

I wasn’t exactly busy, so I hopped into the carriage, and we headed off. I hadn’t been to Lord Valgas’s garish, expensive manor since Lady Flam summoned me, but little had changed about it.

The butler led me to a reception room where a single gentleman waited. “So, you’re the alchemist from the pharmacy, hm? I am Casty Fen Dran Valgas.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m Reiji, the owner of Kirio Drugs.” It had become too annoying to correct the “alchemist” description.

Shaking my hand, Lord Valgas motioned for me to sit on the sofa across from him. “The treatment you made for my wife was very effective. She was thrilled to be the talk of the banquet.”

I laughed. “I’m happy to hear that.”

“My daughter Elaine also had quite the time working at your drugstore. I’m

very grateful.”

“Please, it was nothing.”

Then, however, Lord Valgas brought his face close to mine. “They may think highly of you, but don’t presume that I feel the same. I’m a man who only believes what he sees with his own two eyes.”

Well, obviously.

He lowered his voice to a near whisper. “Elaine has grown into a fine young lady. In that sense, I understand why the male masses would fall to her charms. But if you want my daughter, you must first defeat me, Sir Alchemist!” He glared daggers.

Whoa! Seriously?! I never said I wanted Elaine! But if I point that out, I’ll probably offend him. I’m caught between a rock and a hard place. I stammered, “Ah...um...did you summon me today for a reason?”

“Hmph! Elaine has been cold to me lately. You’re to blame for that, are you not?!”

“How did you come to *that* conclusion?!”

“You’re using my beloved daughter to defeat your archenemy psychologically. You’re quite the conniving beast!” He shot me another glare.

I raised my hands in surrender. “I haven’t done anything, for real!”

“Any time I’m close to her, she whispers, ‘Gross!’ She also tells the maids to do her laundry completely separately. Are you telling me she does those things of her own accord?”

“Um...yes, unfortunately.” *It’s not your fault, Dad.*

“But we’ve always been close!”

“I honestly think she’s just that age. It’s not you.”

Lord Valgas folded his arms, nodding. “Is that why she looks at me as if I’m repugnant?”

“That really depends how intense the look is, but I’d say so.”

“Perhaps it didn’t help that I balked at some of the...undergarments I saw

drying.”

“That’d do it.”

“After that, Elaine began talking about the alchemist at the pharmacy. Maybe that’s where this all started.”

“Don’t blame me. Face reality, bud.”

Elaine calling him gross had to sting, especially given how much Lord Valgas appeared to love her. In his eyes, she’d changed after I appeared on the scene. Or maybe that was just how he wanted to see things.

“Girls Elaine’s age hate acknowledging or even thinking about their fathers in certain ways.”

“B-but I have to be straightforward about how much Elaine has grown.”

“Please don’t. You’ll disgust her even more.”

“It’s too early for her to wear undergarments like that!”

“Didn’t I just tell you to stop talking about this?”

“Wh-who does she plan to show them to? They’re tremendously suggestive!”

“You damn pervert! No wonder she hates you.” I paused. “Uh, wait. Don’t tell me you said all this to Elaine directly?”

“Obviously. Those garments were lewd,” Lord Valgas said disdainfully. “I told her the truth, like any nobleman would.”

Of course Elaine’s mad. “You’re the lewd one!”

“Really?” Lord Valgas perched on the couch, hugging his knees.

He’s actually sad.

Wham! The door swung open, and Elaine stormed in.

“I heard Sir Reiji was here and came as quickly as I could!” she cried. “What I wear is none of your business, Father! I told you to forget what you saw, yet you’re telling Sir Reiji about it? I hate how disgusting you’re being!”

Apparently, Elaine had heard our conversation from outside. Lord Valgas shrank further into himself.

“Hmph!” Elaine grabbed my arm and pulled me off the sofa. “Sir Reiji, come chat with me, not that pervert who claims he’s my father!” She dragged me away.

“Hey, hold up, Elaine!”

“No, I will not hold up.”

Her father stared at us with the pure despair of someone who’d witnessed the apocalypse. Elaine and I left the room, and she led me the length of the mansion.

Lord Valgas must’ve been desperate to see me as the bad guy here, I mused. When Elaine dropped by the drugstore yesterday, she didn’t say her dad had made comments about her underwear. I get why she wouldn’t, but that’s definitely the real problem.

I sighed. “Did you really have to be that blunt? Your dad’s probably crying right now.”

Elaine pouted. “Yes, but...”

“I know Lord Valgas messed up big time, but you don’t really hate him, do you?”

“Of course not.”

“Let’s go apologize later, okay? I’ll come with you.”

“All right...”

When we got to her room, Elaine lacked her usual energy. She seemed to recognize that she’d said something extra cruel.

I think it’s time to patch things up between them. “Leave this to me, Elaine. I’ll create a treatment that’ll keep your old man from ever grossing you out again.”

I dashed out of the manor. I’d already concocted a deodorizer fluid, but it would’ve been rude to tell Lord Valgas to use that; it was basically for toilets. I needed to solve the real problem here. Something was causing Lord Valgas’s B.O. more directly. *If I create a product for that...*

I holed up in the lab and did my thing.

Men's Body Wash: Suppresses the scent of sweat. Sterilizes bacteria.

"All right. This should work." I'd secretly included an Elaine-focused superweapon in the body wash. *She'll never call him gross again!*

Carrying the bottle, I raced back to the mansion. *Now everyone will live happily ever after.*

I got through the gate no problem—actually, the guard bowed his head and greeted me—and headed to the reception room.

Lord Valgas was still hugging his knees on the sofa. "Elaine..."

His daughter's words had really stunned him. I actually felt sort of bad. Then I remembered that he'd made a huge fuss about his daughter's panties. *Never mind.*

I put the body wash on the low table in front of him. "Lord Valgas, if you use the soap in here, Elaine will never find you stinky again!"

"What is this?"

"It's called body wash. It'll erase the odor Elaine hates."

"Hah!" he scoffed. "You really think she'll love me again just because I wash with this? Laughable!"

"That's not what I said." I opened the bottle and fanned my hand over its neck. "Smells great, right?"

"Hrm. It's quite nice."

"Then why not give it a try? This body wash could help you make up with Elaine."

"You should know that I hate being deceived, Alchemist Reiji."

Hunh, really? Well, I'm not lying. "Then what should we do? At this rate, Elaine's going to hate you forever. Are you okay with that?"

"Ngh..."

As I'd guessed, the bit that really stung Lord Valgas was being scorned by the daughter he adored. *She doesn't actually hate him at all—they're just failing to communicate.*

"Unfortunately, Lord Valgas, the gap between you and Elaine will widen if you leave it alone."

"Widen?"

"You eventually won't speak at all."

"At all?" He quivered in despair.

Am I being too mean? Dude is on the verge of tears. "But you can still fix this before it's too late. Use this liquid to wash yourself, Lord Valgas. This is your last chance to make amends with Elaine!"

"I'll do it! I'll *wash* myself!" He began to bawl. It was kind of hard watching an old man cry like that. He wiped his tears and clapped, summoning two maids. "I will bathe now. Prepare the water."

The maids bowed their heads and exited the room, returning with towels. "Preparations are complete, Lord Valgas."

He stood and turned around. "Would you care to join me, Alchemist Reiji?"

"I'm fine, thanks," I said immediately. I had the feeling nobody would benefit from that.

Before Lord Valgas left, I told him where he should concentrate on washing. After about an hour, I heard him return to the reception room. *Long bath, huh?* I hoped that meant he'd really focused on what he was doing.

"Alchemist Reiji...!"

I raised my head at the sound of his voice and saw Lord Valgas sitting across from me in a bathrobe, squeaky clean. *Gleam!*

Wait a second, I thought. *Was he always this dashing?*

I rubbed my eyes, but he still looked charming. *Gleam!*

He tilted his head and looked at me, then crossed his legs and narrowed his eyes. *Gleam!*

Something's wrong. He's like a totally different person.

"Well, lad? What do you think? I've been...reborn!"

His tone was completely different, too. *Who the heck is this dude?!*

"Perhaps now...my dear Elaine...won't hate me anymore." He shot me a bright look.

The pauses between his words were really damn annoying. *He's acting like the melodramatic love interest from a cheesy romance.*

"Um, she probably won't," I replied. "Actually, I'm not sure."

"Your body wash...was perfect." He pulled a single rose from his bag and kissed it.

"You're carrying *flowers?!?*"

What's with this incredibly bad gut feeling? If Lord Valgas was just behaving like more of an urbane gentleman, that'd be fine. And acting like some heartthrob would've been all right in his teens or even early twenties; you could have written it off as immaturity. But this dude was over forty!

Elaine might hate him even more, if anything.

Lord Valgas clapped again, summoning a maid. "Could you...call Elaine for me?"

The maid nodded and vanished, and Lord Valgas stood up. *I really hope the body wash's effects will wear off soon...and that he'll stop striking "cool" poses every time he looks at me.*

"I don't remember reading anything like this in the body wash description," I mumbled.

Someone knocked on the door. "Father, it's me."

"Come in."

"All right."

Elaine looked nervous. I doubted that the two had seen each other since their fight.

“Elaine...” Lord Valgas almost waltzed toward his daughter.

Couldn't you just walk like a normal person?

Suddenly, he embraced her. *Woosh!*

“Huh?!” Elaine panicked, beating at his chest.

She's really hating this.

“Elaine...it's me!”

“Eeeeeek! Who is this man?!”

I approached and pulled Lord Valgas away.

He tumbled onto his butt. “Ow! What's the meaning of this, Alchemist?”

Ugh...now she's crying. She probably thinks some stranger just randomly hugged her. “Are you okay, Elaine?”

“Sir Reiji!” She embraced me tightly. I patted her head to calm her down.

“Th-this isn't what you promised, Alchemist Reiji!”

“The body wash didn't give you the right to suddenly act like a freak! Why'd you grab her like that?!”

“Step away from my daughter!” Lord Valgas insisted.

Elaine turned toward the unfortunate lord. “That voice... Father?”

“Indeed, my dear Elaine...it is I!”

He was starting to sound like a Disney prince or something. *You know what? Perfect. I'll use this over-the-top situation to my advantage.*

“Heh heh heh...your daughter is mine, Valgas!” I laughed with the most evil expression I could muster.

“You bastard! Don't tell me you gave me that body wash...as part of your plan?!”

“Ha ha ha! You may have seen through me, but it's too late! How long I've waited! If I wed this girl, I'll finally be a nobleman!”

“Wed me?! W-wait!” Elaine turned to her father. “Are you saying I'm going to

marry S-Sir Reiji?!"

"Indeed!" I continued. "By joining the Valgas line, I shall rule this town!"

"I'm so happy!"

Ugh. That's the opposite of what I hoped for! You're supposed to be angry that an evil jerk is taking over your family! Stop hugging me! I struggled to fend Elaine off.

"Argh! What're you doing, Sir Reiji?!"

"I'll never let you get away with this, Alchemist Reiji! I sentence you to death...for playing with my daughter's emotions!" Lord Valgas exclaimed.

"I'll never let you harm a single hair on Sir Reiji's body!" Elaine snarled.

Don't take my side! Come on! If Elaine acted like this, my plan would implode.

"I've already made my decision," she told her father. "If you won't recognize our relationship, we'll just have to elope!"

I covered her mouth. "You're complicating things. Be quiet for a sec, okay?" We were wheel-spinning at this point. "What will you do, Valgas? Your daughter hates you! She says you stink, you're gross, you're a *lecherous maggot!*"

"Er...I'm sure she hasn't gone that far."

"You are!" Elaine exclaimed.

I cleared my throat. "I'm giving you a good deal by taking her off your hands. Wouldn't you be happier without her around?"

"I've never *once* thought that!" Now he sounded like himself again. "I've loved her since the day she was born. She's my little girl! It's not as though her words don't pierce my heart, but what of it?! I believe her hatred is temporary!"

"Father..."

"No matter what Elaine does, I will forever be on her side." Lord Valgas smiled sadly. "I love you, my daughter."

Suddenly, Elaine stepped away from me. "*Father!* I'm so, so sorry for saying all those awful things to you!"

Elaine cried in Lord Valgas's arms, apologizing over and over. He rubbed her back, smiling kindly. *All right, my work here is done.*

"Huh? Father, that scent..."

"Ah! That's the body wash Alchemist Reiji gave me. Does it smell odd?"

"Not at all! It's the same as my perfume."

I quietly left the reception room, exiting the mansion.

Two days later, a letter from Lord Valgas arrived at Kirio Drugs. It contained words of gratitude and a postscript stating that he'd never give me his daughter. Valgas also wrote that he'd send someone to the drugstore for more body wash, since a single bottle wouldn't last long.

"Sir Reiji! I'm here to buy some body wash!"

The drills cometh.

When I responded, I wrote that everything about marrying Elaine had been an act and that I had no intention of taking his daughter from him.

Eventually, the men's body wash became a bestselling product endorsed by Lord Valgas himself.

Chapter 8:

Kirio Drugs' Day Off

KIRIO DRUGS closed once a week, and on that day, I usually relaxed. Today was different, however.

According to Noela, there was a lake deep within the woods, and she'd suggested that we hang out there. I had no idea that lake even existed. Apparently, Noela had discovered it last time we were in the woods, while I was gathering herbs.

"Master, over here!" Noela yanked my hand. We were in the usual forest.

"Hold up! Don't pull!"

Next to Noela and I, Mina smiled happily. She held a basket of food for today's lunch—she'd been preparing it all morning.

"I didn't know you had a fishing rod, Mr. Reiji," Mina said.

"Yup. I tried to buy it, but Alf gave it to me instead."

As usual, the general store manager had refused to let me spend money. I honestly felt guilty about it. If I managed to catch something good today, I'd offer it to him.

Noela was collecting caterpillars and bugs off leaves and storing them in a bottle.

"A-are those for bait?" I asked. "I know I asked you to grab some, but..."

"Bait! Bite, bite! Collect too, Mina!" Noela presented Mina with the bottle.

Mina panicked. "I-I'll pass, thank you! Creepy-crawlies scare me."

Yeah, I totally get that, Mina. I could handle one caterpillar, but when I saw twenty wiggling in Noela's bottle, it rattled me.

After we'd walked for a bit, the forest cleared up, and we came across a quiet lake's clear, clean water.

“Master! Mina! Here!” Noela exclaimed.

Mina spread our picnic blanket out. “Wow. This place really is peaceful.”

“Yeah. There’s a nice breeze, too,” I agreed. “It’s quite the secret spot.”

“Lots of monsters around,” warned Noela. “Careful.”

Gah! For real? The creatures must’ve used this as their watering hole. No wonder this place was still a secret. If we got into a battle, I’d have no choice but to leave things to Noela.

I sat on the picnic blanket and sipped the tea Mina poured me before preparing to fish.

“Let’s get ready too, Noela,” Mina suggested.

“Garroo!”

Ready for what? Noela put on her backpack and followed Mina behind some trees. *Ah, I see. Bathroom break.*

Since I was a gentleman, I didn’t attempt to peek or listen to the sounds of nature. I took Caterpillar Number One out of Noela’s bottle, baiting the fishhook before tossing it into the lake.

Yeah, this is what fishing is usually like. Nice and quiet.

Something dinged.

Hrm? If I remember correctly, that sound means...

I hastily checked my identification skill.

Skills: Identification, Medicine Making, Cultivation Ace, <NEW> Sonar (confirms fish locations).

Whoa, cool! That should be super useful!

When I focused on the lake, I saw lots of fish shadows that I couldn’t have spotted before. *Heh heh! With this, I can avoid fishing in spots where I won’t have any luck.* I moved to a different position, waiting for the fish.

“Mr. Reiji!”

“Master!”

My two counter girls called out to me. I turned around only to see them both in bathing suits. Noela wore a one-piece, while Mina wore a bikini with a pareu tied around her waist like a skirt. *Definitely risqué.*

“Master! Master! Look good?” Noela rushed up, wagging her tail, and then spun in a circle for me.

“Yeah, you look great! When did you buy these?”

“Back when we visited San Logro,” Mina replied.

Right, there was a beach near San Logro. They must’ve wanted to swim in the ocean.

“Um, how do I look?”

“You look great, Mina.”

She laughed shyly.

Later, the pair splashed water at each other.

“Eek! It’s so cold! Take this, Noela!”

“Gah! Must get revenge...!”

“Gosh! Why are you getting worked up?”

Frankly, I didn’t mind sitting here watching Mina and Noela enjoy themselves in their swimsuits. I pulled my fishing line up, only to find my hook empty. Something must’ve gotten the bait while I was focused on the ladies.

Casting my line several times, I was met with the same results; something kept eating the bait without me noticing.

Man, I’d really like to take some fish back to Alf and the Rabbit Tavern staff.
I’d apparently underestimated how tough fishing was, since I was a total novice.

“Hunh...fine. Time for this pharmacist to go all out.”

I pulled my line back and walked into the woods. My medicine-making kit was in my bag, so I grabbed it and got to work, creating a spin on the animal lure I’d

crafted for Ririka a while back.

Explosive Mr. Fisher: Pheromone gel. Powerfully attractive to fish senses.

I put the substance on my baited fishhook. "There we go."

I tossed my line into the lake, and immediately, black shadows drew close. However, they soon fled.

What's going on? I tilted my head, only to see a huge shadow approach my hook. *Ah! That must be the biggest catch in the lake!* Exhilarated, I gripped the rod tightly, feeling a powerful force pull at it. *Here we go!*

"How's it looking, Mr. Reiji?" Mina called.

"Great!"

My back-and-forth pull with the enormous fish continued. I felt it weaken. "Take *this!*"

I pulled with all my strength, yanking it out of the water and onto the ground.

"Owie! What's the deal with putting a hook on that thing? How rude."

I'd hooked...a girl. From the lake. *What?* The beautiful, blue-haired young woman pulled the hook from the side of her mouth and spat it out.

"M-Mr. Reiji! You caught a girl?!" Mina cried.

"Where you get her, Master?!"

"Both of you calm down. I'm just as confused as you are. She's obviously not some big, hungry fish...but she did come out of the lake."

Rumble.

I heard a strange sound and looked over to see the girl holding her stomach. "It's been so long since I had a proper meal, and then it had a hook in it? Am I being tortured?"

"Um, excuse me," I said.

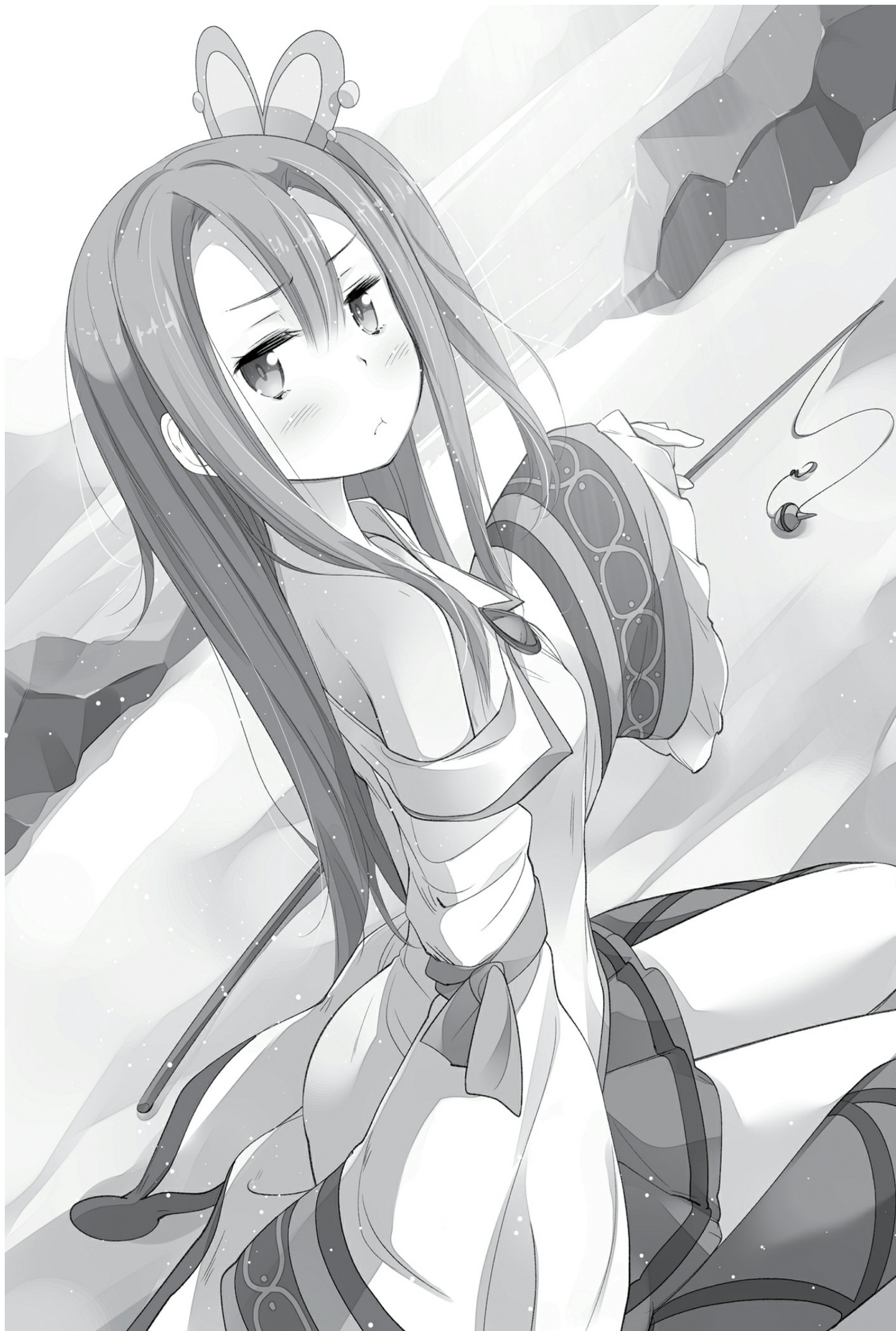
"Ah! You're the awful human who caught me!"

“I’d argue that you got yourself caught. I just wanted to hook some fish. Sorry.”

I apologized profusely, but the girl lounging on the shore glared.

“I’m Reiji the pharmacist,” I continued. “And you are...?”

“Vivi, the spirit of this lake. It’s been a long time since I last spoke to a human.”



A spirit, eh? I decided Vivi might be the real deal, since humans couldn't exactly stay underwater the way she had.

Mina tilted her head, puzzled. "Lake spirits are real? I always thought they were fantasy creatures."

"Fantasy creatures? *You're* a ghost, Mina."

Vivi's stomach rumbled again. "I'm hungry."

Mina, Noela, and I exchanged glances.

"Um, we brought our lunch," I told Vivi. "Care to join us?"

"Are you sure it's all right for a lake spirit to have some?"

"Of course."

"But you don't even know me. Won't I interrupt your pleasant meal? I don't want things to be awkward."

"It won't be awkward at all." This lake spirit had such a negative attitude.

"All right. Are you sure you're not just acting generous? Are you going to insult me like crazy behind my—"

"We're *not*!"

"It fine." Noela took the lake spirit's hand. "Come."

She led Vivi to the picnic blanket. Mina and I followed, and Mina served the sandwiches she'd made that morning. As usual, Noela dug right in. Vivi also ate quickly, her small mouth chewing quietly.

"What do lake spirits normally eat?" I asked.

"Humans used to bring me food. But lately, I've really been starving."

I asked for details. Vivi explained that, a long time ago, she'd been worshipped as a spirit and gotten by on offerings. Nowadays, those were few and far between. Not many people braved the dangerous lake just to worship Vivi, since there were so many monsters and beasts around the shore.

"I'm sure you'll just laugh about how pathetic I am later," she muttered.

"We won't," I insisted. "Have you considered eating fish?"

“I don’t eat friends. Er...no, that’s not quite true. I...I just can’t catch them!”
Vivi blurted out.

“Would you like to try fishing with me? I just made something that’ll help—I call it Explosive Mr. Fisher.” I cut a sturdy-looking branch and turned it into an impromptu fishing rod with some extra line.

“Aah...!” Vivi let out a bizarre gasp as she stared at the bait wiggling in Noela’s bottle. “C-could I maybe eat one of those, Mr. Reiji?”

Right. I forgot that I hooked her because she went for my bait. “What are you, a carp or something? We’re using these to catch fish.”

I applied some Explosive Mr. Fisher to the bait and cast my line into the lake. “Look. They’re coming for it.”

“Why are you being so kind to me?” Just like that, Vivi’s mood soured again.

“Good question.”

“Are you winning me over so that I’ll be easy pickings later on? I knew it!”

I honestly don’t have an ulterior motive.

Suddenly, something pulled at Vivi’s rod with wild strength.

“Wh-whoa! Th-this feels big, Mr. Reiji!”

“Looks like your ‘friend’ is resisting with all its might.”

“Ha ha...uh, I don’t have any friends.”

“Save the pity party for later!” I cried. “You’ve got a big one on your line. Pull it up!”

Vivi was clearly struggling to dig her feet into the ground and hold the fishing rod. I circled behind her and grabbed it. “On three!”

“Huh? What?!”

“One...two...three!” We pulled as hard as we could, lifting the fish above the water’s surface. It came flying toward us.

Ka-thunk! Swoosh! Thwack!

The forty-centimeter fish smacked Vivi right in the face. “Bleh!”

M-my bad.

“I caught one, Mr. Reiji!” Despite the fish outline across her cheeks, Vivi smiled happily.

“Let’s catch another.”

Nearby, Noela and Mina teamed up to use my rod, catching and casting repeatedly. Noela baited the hooks and applied Explosive Mr. Fisher, then Mina handled fishing, tossing the line into the lake.

What looked like about twenty fish flopped near their feet. *H-holy crap! They’re actually one hell of a team.*

“We’re not gonna lose to you, Mr. Reiji!” Mina smiled. Noela nodded next to her.

“Time to step up our game, Vivi.”

“O-okay!”

“Can your lake-spirit powers make hooking fish easier?”

“Ha ha ha! Do you really think I have powers like that?” Vivi looked nervous. “But, uh...please don’t ditch me, Mr. Reiji.”

“All right, fine,” I grunted. “In that case, we’ll use *my* skills.”

Ultimately, Vivi and I never got it together and didn’t manage to catch up. We caught twenty-three fish total, while Mina and Noela managed a whopping twenty-six.

“We win, Noela!”

“Garrooooo!”

The girls, Vivi, and I had caught more than enough fish to give the staff at the general store and the Rabbit Tavern. I grabbed the fish we’d take back with us and then made a small tank for the rest. “You can have the leftover fish, Vivi.”

For some reason, she looked thunderstruck. “Huh? But why?”

“What do you mean? We don’t need them, and you were hungry, right? Whenever you’re peckish, have some fish.”

“This is what humans always do,” Vivi sighed. “They leave offerings but then ask the impossible of me! ‘Make it rain.’ ‘Get rid of the sun.’ I-I’m not a goddess! I’m sorry! It’s not my fault! Please, don’t dirty my lake anymore!”

Ah. So, that’s why she’s so negative.

“I don’t want anything from you,” I told Vivi.

She frowned.

“I hate cold, calculated relationships like that,” I insisted. “When you’re friends with someone, it’s okay to just give and take without looking to gain.”

“You mean, we’re friends...?”

I took Vivi’s hand.

“Me too!” Noela put her hand on top of ours.

Mina followed suit. “I’d also love to be your friend, Vivi! I had lots of fun hanging out today.”

“See?” I said.

Tears rolled down Vivi’s cheeks. “Thank you so much. Please visit again! I’ll be waiting.”

That’s how we befriended the unfortunate lake spirit, Vivi.

Chapter 9:

A Stylish Prescription

IT WAS A PEACEFUL AFTERNOON, but Zeral had dropped in to complain for the seventy-eighth time in the past three days.

“Feris is obsessing about something,” he told me. “So, Reiji, pal—”

“Hrm...?”

My eyes were suddenly drawn to Zeral’s scalp. *Wait. How old is he again? I’m pretty sure we’re around the same age.*

“Why are you spacing out?” Zeral griped.

“Uh, sorry. It’s nothing. Anyway, buddy...how old are you?”

“What’s gotten into you? I’m twenty-six.”

“You’re two years older than me, sir?”

“S-sir?! Come on, don’t be so cold!”

I chuckled. “I’m just messing with you. Twenty-six, huh? So, is being the head of the Alonzo family at that age stressful?”

“Hmm, not really. Most days are pretty fun, and if something nasty happens, I have you to complain to!”

“What about Feris?” I continued. “Are things going well?”

“Yup. We’re head over heels in love with each other.”

“Okay, fine. Wait!” I remembered that Zeral said Feris had been complaining. “I think I know what’s on Feris’s mind.”

“Really?! I should’ve expected as much from the genius alchemist! Is she worried about having a kid or something?”

“No, it’s nothing like that. I’m betting it’s about *you*.”

“Wait, what? What could it be?” Zeral crossed his arms, tilting his head.

Behind him, Feris entered the drugstore. Noticing her boyfriend, she quietly backed away, watching things unfold from a distance.

I locked eyes with Feris. *Want to talk to me about his problem?* I mouthed, pointing at Zeral's scalp. She nodded.

I guess she understood what I meant. Ugh...I knew it'd be that. Oh, well.

"I'm too busy to explain this," I told Zeral. "Go home for now. Come back if you figure things out with Feris for yourself."

"Dude, come on!" Zeral left the store, irritated.

"Hey, Feris," I called.

She made sure her boyfriend was gone before coming to the counter. "Hello, Mr. Reiji. Um, I take it you saw Zeral's problem?"

"Yup. It's a shame."

"That's *my* line," Feris sighed. "I noticed his hair thinning. I haven't brought it up with him...but he's definitely going bald."

Zeral's twenty-six, huh? Man, why is this making me gloomy? I sighed. "Feris, you haven't been tying Zeral down lately, have you?"

"I mean, sometimes I tie him down with *ropes*, but..."

"I'm not talking about what you do between the sheets!" *They're seriously into bondage? Man, it'll be awkward next time I see him.* "I'm talking about stress. That could cause what's happening to Zeral's hairline."

"I drink the tea you prescribed me every night, so I've been very even-keeled."

"Good to hear. Hrm...well, is this really such a big deal? At the end of the day, Zeral is Zeral."

Feris shook her head sadly. "When I first brought him home, I heard the maids talking behind our backs. 'Is that lame guy Lady Feris's boyfriend? How old is he?' Even Father brought it up. 'Has Zeral *always* looked like that?' You should've seen his expression."

"Not many dads are apathetic about their daughters' boyfriends."

“I honestly should’ve scolded the maids...but, instead, I found myself agreeing. I don’t want to break up with Zeral over something like thinning hair, though. I worship the ground he walks on!”

“Yeah, yeah. Enough with the lovebird stuff. I get it, you’re soul mates.”

If Feris and Zeral were in love, why did she care about anything else? I supposed that, since Feris was a wealthy merchant’s daughter, she had an image to maintain. And I could understand wanting your partner to be as cool as possible.

“Look, Zeral isn’t some lady-killer. He’s a normal guy, like me.”

“When did this become a competition?”

I shrugged. “Let me guess. You want a treatment?”

“Yes. Is it possible? Can you prescribe a miracle drug to make Zeral a hundred times cooler?”

“Like hell!” *That wouldn’t be a miracle drug, it’d just be a miracle!* “If we fix the *reason* Zeral’s uncool, it wouldn’t raise any eyebrows. And I guess he’ll be more stylish than before.”

That was enough to get Feris to agree.

Heading for the lab, I bumped into Mina and Noela doing the dishes. “Hey, ladies, I have a question. Let’s say I suddenly had a super-ugly face. Would you treat me any differently?”

Mina nearly burst into laughter. “That’s an odd question to ask out of nowhere.”

“No worries, Master! No become ugly.”

“This is a what-if situation.”

Mina stacked some plates and then finally answered. “No matter what happens, you’re you, Mr. Reiji. Nothing could change that.”

“Noela no change. Master no change!” There were folks, like Noela, who immediately rejected what-if scenarios.

Still, I hugged the two tightly. “Thanks.” *My girls are the best.*

“You’re such a weirdo, Mr. Reiji.”

“Lonely, Master?”

“Nah,” I assured Noela. “Ah—crap. I can’t keep Feris waiting too long.”

I got my butt into the lab and started the new concoction. I sympathized with Feris, and at the end of the day, I couldn’t just stand by as Zeral’s friend.

I shook the bottle, and its contents shone.

Hair-Growth Shampoo: Grows hair and promotes blood flow in scalp.

“It’s hard watching someone go bald so young,” I muttered. I was betting that Zeral’s hair loss was genetic; it likely had nothing to do with stress. With this shampoo, though, he would be fine.

I took the bottle back to the storefront. “Feris, if Zeral washes his hair with this—”

“He’ll be cool again?”

“Well, no. It’s a shampoo that promotes hair growth.”

“I’ll have him use it right away!” Feris snatched the bottle and ran out of the drugstore.

Several days later, a tanned stranger with gold highlights in his hair entered Kirio Drugs. “Sup, Reiji baby?!” He approached me with his hand raised.

Does he want me to high-five him? “Heh heh...hey.”

Slap!

“Yeah, bro!”

Who was this dude, and why was he so buddy-buddy with me?

“So, like, Feris totally got on my ass about using that shampoo stuff,” he told me. “Guess it’s your new thing, yeah?”

Wait—Feris? And he’s got long hair... No way. Is this surfer dude really...Zeral? I mean, I said he’d be more stylish, but I meant his hair!

“Oh, uh, yeah. That was me,” I chuckled.

“Right on!”

“I’m glad your hair regrew, sir.”

“Hold up! What do you mean, ‘sir’? Aren’t we best friends? Break down these lame walls between us, dude!”

“Sir, when you go back to normal, so will I,” I insisted.

“Wha...?” Zeral shook his head. “Anyway, this hair’s rad! How wicked am I? Heck yeah, dude! It’s like I’m the only one hangin’ ten!”

“You’re definitely something else.”

“I was getting hella worried about how much hair was wiping out. Know what I mean, man?”

You were getting worried? It was already game over for you!

“Then you whipped up that shampoo, bro! Once I used it, I woke up with a full head of hair! That crap is legit, for real. Did you make it just for me?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Thanks, bro!” Surfer Zeral raised his hand.

Fine, I’ll play along. I gave him yet another high-five.

Immediately, he gripped my hand. “Here’s to our bromance!”

“Please don’t say that. It’s embarrassing.”

“Reiji’s gettin’ all shy! Whoa!”

“You suck,” I muttered.

Sending him home, I headed back to work.

A few days later, I heard through the grapevine that Feris had *requested* Zeral’s surfer act. Once his hairline changed, she apparently wanted him to match everything else to his long hair, producing the beast known as Surfer Zeral.

I guess changing your hairstyle can make you want to change in other ways, too. But, seriously, what was she even shooting for?!

“Talk about going overboard,” I muttered.

A few days later, the usual Zeral dropped in, neither bald *nor* a surfer.

Looking at him, I thought to myself, *Normal Zeral is much easier to swallow.*

Chapter 10:

The Price of Curiosity

BY THE TIME I'd finished the morning chores in the meadow and restocked the drugstore, it was already noon.

You know, I actually do a lot around here. "But it's all fun, so whatever."

I lay down in the lab, stretching my limbs out, just as Noela rolled in on the floor. "What's up, Noela?"

She stopped right next to my face. "Stomach hurts, Master."

"What? Did you eat something funny?"

Noela shook her head. "No funny. Stick in road. Ate it."

"That qualifies as funny." Kirio Drugs didn't make any treatments for stomach pain, though. Potions were only for external injuries.

Mina poked her head into the lab. "Mr. Reiji! Noela! Lunch is ready!"

"No want!" Noela exclaimed.

"What's the matter?" asked Mina. "You're always hungry."

"She's got a bit of a tummy ache right now."

To my surprise, Mina looked upset instead of worried. "Noela, you ate something you picked up in the middle of the road, didn't you? Gosh! How many times do I have to tell you not to do that?!"

"Wow," I said. "You picked up on *that* fast."

Mina sighed heavily. "Whenever I shop with Noela, she eats anything remotely edible off the ground. I've told her dozens of times that she's going to make herself sick, but she won't listen to me."

"Sounds like she totally brought this on herself," I agreed.

Noela rolled toward me. "No abandon Noela, Master!"

It's not fair when you look at me with those puppy eyes, you dang fluffy werewolf girl! Still, even creating an indigestion treatment wouldn't change a thing if we didn't fix Noela's behavior.

"All right, I've got it," I said. "Noela, I'll make you some stomach meds later. Come on, Mina."

Leaving Noela on the lab floor, I led Mina to the living room. "Got any good ideas for making Noela quit scavenging?"

"Hm...I think if you scolded her about it, she'd stop."

"Really?"

"Er...maybe not. It's less that she eats stuff off the ground because she's hungry, and more that she's satisfying her curiosity. I think she just wants to know what things taste like."

"Yeah, well, curiosity killed the cat. Noela's a werewolf, but you get my point."

"She recently started chewing the rokushou nuts that friendly kodola leaves us," Mina added. "Maybe that started this bad habit."

Noela's curious about flavors, huh...?

"I'm going to create something to help her quit scavenging," I told Mina.

"You can do that?"

"It's worth trying, at least." I headed back to the lab.

Noela sprawled out on the floor. "Master...Master..."

Oh, right. I told her I'd make some stomach meds. Whoops. "Can you promise you'll stop eating off the ground?" I asked Noela.

"Promise! No snack anymore."

It'd be great if this was the end of her scavenging, but I'll make the other product just in case, I decided. I dub this Operation Sugarcoat!

Grrrrrgggh.

"Stomach rumbled, Master."

“That it did.”

“Gonna eat lunch.”

She still has an appetite? I suppose you can't take the Noela out of Noela. The werewolf girl popped to her feet and trotted out of my lab. Perfect timing. Now she won't figure out my contingency plan.

“You're in for a world of hurt if you break your promise, Noela,” I muttered.

I guess I'll make her stomach treatment and wait.

Stomach Medicine: Corrects and facilitates digestion.

After finishing the medicine, I grabbed something Noela was likely to eat from the lab. Then I left, initiating Operation Sugarcoat before returning.

The new stomach treatment was quite effective; Noela's indigestion quickly vanished, and she and Mina went shopping together as planned the next day. I watched the store.

“If Noela keeps her promise, she'll have nothing to worry about,” I reflected. However, I fully expected her to break it.

Noela soon returned to the drugstore, grimacing. *Wow, that didn't take very long.*

“You're home early. What's up?” I asked with a grin.

Tears formed in Noela's eyes. “Broke promise, Master! Ate more off ground. Mouth bitter! Thing on ground bitter!”

Feeling sorry for Noela, I tossed her a potion to cleanse her palate. She downed it quickly.

Just then, Mina arrived, having followed Noela back. “Noela ate a nut off the road and started crying about how it tasted, Mr. Reiji. I'm sure those nuts aren't bitter, though.”

I smacked a vial down on the counter. “This is the new treatment I created for Operation Sugarcoat,” I announced.

Bitter Coat α: Creates a harmless yet pungent film around a soaked object.

Mina brought her mouth close to my ear so Noela couldn't hear. "You set a trap for her?"

"Let's just say I was prepared. If she didn't keep her promise, she'd suffer the consequences."

The bitter coat, which was similar to a repellent, could remove Noela's appetite for things off the ground by teaching her that they were "bitter."

"Wow." Mina sounded impressed. "You're something else, Mr. Reiji. And here I thought a scolding would be more than enough. Noela does scavenge a lot, so I'm sure this scared her."

"Ground things bitter," Noela grumbled. "Hate bitter!"

It looked as though I'd taught Noela a lesson. I felt bad, but this was better than her scavenging causing an illness I couldn't cure.

Eventually, the bitter coat sold to locals looking to keep pests away from their garbage, which helped beautify the town of Kalta.

Chapter 11:

The Demon King

Another Side

DEEP INSIDE the demon king's castle, the adjutant Belial knelt before the throne, presenting his master with a certain medicine.

"I obtained this new treatment in a human town, Your Majesty. It's called a potion, but it's completely different from normal potions."

"Oh?" The demon king, Garo Ejil, rose from his throne. He took the bottle and inspected the transparent liquid illuminated in the moonlight. "This is the stuff, eh?"

"Most potions stink and taste filthy," Belial continued. "This is supposedly different. I've heard it's quite effective, too. If it becomes widely available on the humans' front lines..."

The demon king tuned Belial out. The adjutant was always painfully serious when it came to matters such as these; Garo Ejil found it extremely boring. He pretended to listen with a somber expression, focusing on the potion bottle in his hands. He opened the lid and sniffed its contents; they barely had a scent.

The demon king had once drunk a human potion. It had been disgusting. Would this be any different?

"I would like to draw your attention to another matter, Your Majesty," Belial continued. "About our direction and unit formations..."

The demon king was already gulping down the human potion. Its fruity aroma made its way through his nostrils as he tasted the liquid's mysterious, slightly sweet flavor. He finished the drink and stared at the empty bottle, blurting out, "What is this? It's delicious!"

"Excuse me?"

“Do you have any more of these potions?”

“No, we just happened to find this one.”

“I see. In that case, I’ll go get some.” The demon king put on his cape, turning his back to Belial.

“Pardon?! Um, Your Majesty, I hoped to discuss unit formations with—”

“As long as you’ve given them serious thought, Belial, we’ll go with the ones you prefer. Whatever transpires, I won’t hold you responsible. Oh—do me a favor and sign the paperwork on the table,” the demon king ordered, waving his arm. “There’s a lot.”

If he stuck around any longer, he wouldn’t be able to get away; he’d have to strategize with Belial.

The demon king was heading to a human town on his own. There was little doubt that Belial would try and stop him—scold him, even. The adjutant would say something about how he wasn’t majestic enough, or that he wasn’t setting a proper example for his soldiers. Just imagining it made the demon king want to flee immediately. So he did.

He activated his teleportation magic—a special type that only the demon king could cast. It would deplete most of his magical energy, but it was worth it.

“See you later, Belial.”

“Wait, Your Majesty!”

Shiing!

Bright light filled the castle, and the demon king vanished.

Reiji’s Side

I was watching the drugstore when someone resembling a boy waddled in. As far as I could tell, he was around junior-high age, and he wore a wild-looking cape. “S-so, this is Kirio Drugs?”

“Yes, that’s right,” I replied. “Are you okay?”

“I’m quite fine! I’ve come from afar to acquire one of your new potions.”

“Is that so? Wow. Thanks. One potion will run you twelve hundred rin.” I bagged a potion and waited for the boy to give me the cash.

He looked confused. “You’re asking *me* for money?”

“Yes, I’m asking *you* for money.”

He’s not very human-like. I’m just going to assume he’s from a different race. I used my identification skill to confirm.

Garó Ejil: The rebellious tyrant who rules demonkind. Known as the “demon king.”

“You’re asking *me* for money?” Garó Ejil repeated, glaring at me.

What is he, some kind of broken NPC? Frankly, I was terrified, but I couldn’t afford to buckle and offer him a free potion. *All customers are equal, damn it!*

“If you want one, you gotta pay up,” I said firmly.

Lo and behold, the demon king actually stepped backward.

He’s retreating?! “Oh...wait. Do you not have cash on you?” He didn’t seem like the type to carry money.

“I do not possess human currency,” he confirmed.

I reshelved the potion.

“Why did you return my potion to the shelf, human?”

“Did you really think you were gonna get one for free? Sorry, but you need to head home.”

“Then I’ll use my powers to blow this drugstore away, leaving nothing and no one behind. Heh heh heh!” the demon king cackled.

I jabbed my index finger at his face. “Keep in mind that I won’t be able to make potions anymore if that happens.”

“I was just kidding! I’m sorry. I only want one potion,” Garo Ejil pleaded, adding, “Um...they call me the demon king, and I’m pretty tough!”

“And your point is...?”

Garo Ejil slouched. When it came to knowing nothing about the human world or common sense, he was even worse than Drills.

“Look,” I said. “Let me ask you a question. Say you sold potions so that you could feed your family. If someone tried to take your potions with brute force, what would you think of him?”

“That...he was in the wrong.”

Hmm. Even this demon king has some integrity. “Uh-huh.”

I might’ve been rude, but since Garo Ejil was a customer, he had to pay cash if he wanted to buy the drugstore’s products. If he had extenuating circumstances, then he should tell me—depending on the issue, I might give him one on the house. Or he could offer something other than money—I was always open to barter or paying in favors.

The door to the house opened, and Noela poked her head in. “Food ready, Master!”

“Awesome. I’ll be there in a sec.”

Ba-dump!

I heard an odd sound, and looked over to see the demon king staring at Noela.

“Garoo? Hello.”

“H-hello. U-um, might I have your name? I am Garo Ejil.”

Noela tilted her head, puzzled. “Noela is Noela.”

“Ah, Noela! What a lovely name! Your beautiful ears, gorgeous silver hair, and stunning eyes must charm men the world over! Noela, I shall make you my wife!”

“Ew. No.” Noela trotted over to me and hugged me tightly. “Noela love Master. Hate you.”

He's the demon king, but it took less than ten seconds for him to get his butt rejected.



His proposal tossed right back in his face, Garo Ejil backed away. “You stand in my way yet again, human?!”

“Er...my name is Reiji. And I’m not really standing in your way. She just said that she literally hates you.”

Noela was adorable, but of course she’d be weirded out by a random marriage proposal from a stranger. I patted her soft head, and she retreated to the house.

“Well, I’m going to eat lunch now, so could you head home?” I asked the demon king.

“W-wait, Reiji. Heh heh...how about this? If you give me a potion and Noela, then when I conquer the world, I’ll grant you half. How does that sound?” The demon king cackled as though he were invincible.

This kid doesn’t understand a damn thing. “Listen, if you conquered the world, why would you give half to some guy who did nothing? Are you stupid? Think about your hardworking underlings. Shouldn’t *they* be rewarded? Take better care of your people!”

“You’re right. You’re absolutely right.” The demon king slouched again, then raised his head as though remembering something. “Wait! Noela is *worth* half the world to me!”

“You just thought of it now, didn’t you?”

“Urgh...h-how’d you know?”

“I’m not giving you Noela. She doesn’t like you.” *Plus, I don’t need half the world.*

“I want Noela. And I also want a potion. What the hell should I do?!” the demon king whined.

“Man, Noela’s crazy about my potions, too,” I muttered.

“Really? Then I’ll get two potions instead!”

I reminded the demon king of his plight. “We’re arguing because you don’t even have the cash to pay for *one*.”

“Ah...” he sulked some more. “That’s right.”

“You legit forgot?!”

“Damn it all! Cursed human! I am the *demon king*!” Garo Ejil was half in tears as he marched out of the drugstore.

Hey, look, everyone. I fought off the demon king!

Three days later, he returned.

I rested my head on my hands and asked him with half-open eyes, “Why’re you here now?”

Garo Ejil grinned victoriously, plopping a leather bag down on the counter. “How’s this?!”

“Oh, you got some money together?”

“But of course. I am the demon king, after all,” he stated matter-of-factly. “I told some terrified humans as much, and they put their money in this bag. I suppose, even among the lesser races, there are those who understand my greatness.”

He mugged innocent people? I checked inside the leather bag and found an oddly large amount of small change. “You’re telling me they all believed you were the demon king? Did you use some super-powerful magic to convince them?”

“Of course I didn’t! That would lay bare my location, and my underlings would come for me. The humans took my kingly manner seriously.”

Okay. A schoolboy was walking around, calling himself the demon king. He says the people he met were terrified, but he didn’t actually prove his identity to them. Still, they gave him the small coins he desired. That means this money is...

“Good work.” I patted the demon king’s shoulder. “Did the humans look sad?”

“No, not at all!”

I nodded, giving him a bemused gaze. *They definitely did. They were just donating money to a pathetic street kid. And he didn’t collect nearly enough.*

“Wh-what’s with that look?”

“You still don’t have enough cash for a potion, but I’ll sell you one anyway. I feel bad for you.”

“St-stop that! I disdain your pity! Augh! H-how much money am I short?! Heh heh heh...I’ll gather the funds in no time at all!”

“You can’t stop me from sympathizing with you. Seriously, it’s fine. I really do feel bad.”

“I don’t need your weird *sympathy*!”

I quietly passed him a potion.

“Damn it! If I take this, it’ll be a handout! But I want it so badly...gah!”

Noela heard our voices and ran over, a bottle in hand. She’d been drinking the potion I made her this morning.

People treat the stuff like soda these days.

“What wrong, Master?”

The demon king grabbed the bottle I’d handed him, kneeling in front of her. “Noela! Would you accept this potion from me?”

“No need. Have potion from Master.”

Tch. Although he was the demon king, my heart went out to him.

Garo Ejil trembled and looked at me. “It’s you interfering again, Reiji!”

“Sorry Noela’s still rejecting you,” I replied. “Want another potion to take home?”

His tears began to hit the floor. “You made a fool of me! I’m the demon king! Why must I suffer like this?!”

“Come on. You’re not suffering. Just take a consolation potion. You wanted one, right?”

“I don’t need a consolation potion! I just wanted a *normal* potion!” Then the demon king seemed to realize something. “Ah...!”

“Why’re you grinning all of a sudden?”

“If I learn to make potions, Noela will fall for me!” He straightened his cape.
“Bwa ha ha ha!”

“Jeez, you’re loud.”

“Reiji...no! Dr. Reiji! Please, make me your apprentice!”

The demon king bowed his head. If other demons or demon lords—assuming a “demon lord” was a thing—saw that, I was sure they’d freak out and tell Garo Ejil to stop immediately.

“Sorry, not possible,” I replied.

“Heh heh heh! I knew you’d say that, Dr. Reiji. Listen here! If you make me your apprentice, I promise you half the world!”

“Don’t make promises like that when you haven’t even taken it over yet,” I sighed. “Look, I can’t teach you to make potions.” Well, since Garo Ejil *was* the demon king, for all I knew he might be capable of medicine-making.

“You truly possess an artisan’s secretive spirit,” Garo Ejil mused. “So, instead of teaching me, you’d prefer for me to *steal* your skills and learn without your knowledge?”

“I didn’t say anything like that! Don’t you have things to do? A war to handle?”

“A foolish question. Hmm...” Garo Ejil paused. “I can drop by for about five hours, four days a week.”

“I’m not teaching you a thing. Okay? Um...things get really hectic on the weekend, so it’d be a big help if you came then.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem. I’ll make sure my weekends are available.”

“I’m not gonna go easy on you.”

“I hope not! Put me through hell!”

That was how Kirio Drugs hired the demon king.

Chapter 12:

Truth and Little White Lies

LEAVING NOELA in charge of the drugstore, I headed back into the lab.

The Demon King Ejil, my newest employee, followed me. “What medicine are we making today, Dr. Reiji?”

“We’re low on potions, so I’m whipping up some of those,” I replied. “Hrm...I think we need to make something else, too.”

“I’ll go take a look!” Ejil immediately exclaimed, heading into the store.

He’s pretty useful.

“Ejil seems to be doing well!” giggled Mina, entering the lab with tea in hand.

It had been three days since Ejil started at Kirio Drugs, and he’d already memorized the drugstore’s products and their effects. He was also fast when it came to calculating bills. In terms of skills and knowledge, he could probably run the store on his own for an hour or two.

“He’s helpful,” I agreed. “The problem is that other than me, his teacher, and Noela, the girl he loves, he treats everyone like they’re his subjects.”

“That really is the power of love, huh? Noela *is* awfully cute.” Mina looked like she found it hilarious.

No matter what Ejil says or does, Noela pays him literally no attention. It’s actually sort of impressive.

The demon king returned. “Doctor, our stock of energy potions is low. We also need more deodorizer and—”

“I’ve made some tea, Ejil. Would you like some?”

“*Woman!* How dare you interrupt me?! I am discussing important matters with the doctor!”

I lightly brought my palm down on Ejil’s head. *Whack!*

“Her name isn’t ‘woman’! She’s Miss Mina to you. Thanks, Mina. We’ll gladly have some tea.”

“Right! We will! Posthaste!” Ejil exclaimed. “Would you like some sugar, Doctor? Oh—you don’t take sugar, do you? My apologies.” The demon king was obviously kissing my butt.

“Good luck with work, you two!”

“Not your place, Miss Mina,” Ejil snapped. “I hardly want your encouragement.”

I smacked him again. *Whack!*

Mina simply smiled and exited the lab.

At this rate, it would be difficult to let Ejil serve customers. The situation wasn’t unlike what had happened with Elaine. *Oh, well. To be fair, Ejil’s really an employee in name only. He’s here because he wants to learn to make potions.*

Ejil glanced at me. “Doctor? I hear from some of the regulars that you use your skills to help people in need.”

“Yup.”

“Well, um...I’m in need.” Ejil grabbed the lab’s world map and pointed. “The humans are pushing back my Third Eastern Division. At this rate, one of my strongholds will fall. Please, assist me.”

“That’s a crazy request! I’m not a tactician. I make medicine! Get it?” *Has he forgotten that I’m human?!*

“Then make me a medicine that’ll resurrect the eight legendary historical demon kings. If it works, I’ll be able to conquer the world! You’ll solve the Third Eastern Division problem!”

“I can’t make anything like that. Even if I could, I’d never let you resurrect demon kings!” If we had that many around, this world would enter its very own chaotic, war-torn Sengoku Period.

Huh...? I realized that, according to my medicine-making skill, I actually *could* create a revival potion. Its effects seemed limited, though. And I’d never even heard of the ingredients.

If I asked Ejil, he might be able to get me those...but I'm not going to make it. I decided to keep the potion's existence a secret; it'd only invite trouble if I mentioned it.

"What about a medicine that eradicates humans?" Ejil continued.

"That'd be a bioweapon. I can't make anything that awful."

My medicine-making skill reacted again. *Gah!* Needless to say, Ejil didn't need to know.

The demon king changed the subject. "I want to know what Noela truly thinks of me, Doctor!"

"I'm pretty sure she's already said."

"But she is crafty and runs hot and cold."

Noela? Crafty? Come on.

"I wish to know her truest feelings. Could you make an honesty treatment?"

Ejil seemed to think that Noela's iciness hid her embarrassment at her infatuation. The fact that he was asking me for help meant that he didn't possess any honesty magic. However, my medicine-making skill responded again.

I guess I could make what he wants. Urgh...when he asks with that expression, I can't help wanting to give him a hand. Still, he's better off not knowing some things.

"You gotta promise me—no matter what Noela says to you, no freaking out, no crying, no rampaging," I told Ejil. "If you commit to that, I'll help."

"I promise!"

"The ingredients are pretty unique." I jotted them down; they included medicinal herbs, tree roots I'd never heard of, and even monster blood. "Can you get this stuff for me?"

Ejil stood. "Of course! I'll use my army's full force!"

He activated some sort of magic. A spell circle appeared at his feet and glowed brightly, and he vanished.

All this, just so he can hear how his crush feels. My heart goes out to his army.

It didn't take me long to finish working. I waited for a bit.

Fweeeen!

The spell circle from earlier reappeared in the air. Ejil dropped from it and fell to his knees. "Haah...haah...D-Doctor, I've got it all...!"

"Whoa. You okay?"

"I-I'm the only one who can use teleportation magic...and it takes a lot of power."

That explained why Ejil looked so drained. Out of breath, the demon king was as docile as a frozen fish. Weird comparison, I know.

I took the two leather bags he held and checked their contents. *Yup. He got it all.*

I hurried to complete my medicine-making work, bottling and shaking the ingredients Ejil had gathered.

Truth Juice: Makes inner thoughts audible for about half a day.

"What's the plan?" I asked. "You gonna get Noela to drink this, or should I?"

Ejil, still conked out on the floor, stayed as quiet as a frozen salmon.

"Bleh. I guess it doesn't matter, really." I headed back into the drugstore.

Noela's ears twitched as she sensed my approach; she turned around. "What wrong, Master?"

"Yo! You're doing a good job. I made a new treatment in the laboratory, and it's pretty tasty. Wanna try it?"

"Yup, yup!" I handed her the bottle, and she downed it in one gulp.

Let's see whether this stuff works. "How do you feel about me, Noela?"

"Garoo?" As Noela spoke, her inner thoughts also resounded through the drugstore: *"What this all about, Master?"*

“Whoa!” I gasped. “It seriously works. Holy crap!”

Noela tilted her head, clearly confused. Judging by her reaction, *she* couldn’t hear her thoughts.

“Um, so...yeah, how do you feel about me?” I repeated.

“Love Master.” Noela wagged her tail, hugging me tightly. “*Super-duper love love love love love bestest!*”

Love, huh? I see. Before I could ask how she felt about Ejil, the boy opened the door and stepped in. “You’re good to go, Ejil.”

“Okay.” He grinned.

If he really thinks Noela runs hot and cold, he probably assumes he’s going to hear the “hot” side.

“Noela.”

“Garoo?”

The demon king played the moment up, tossing his hair. “How do you feel about Garo Ejil, who will one day conquer the world?”

Noela blinked a few times and then laid it out as directly as possible. “Don’t care. *Don’t care.*”

Even I didn’t expect her not to give a crap! In a way, this was the worst possible answer for Ejil. “See? I told you. She hasn’t been messing with you.”

“I-I’m only just getting started, Doctor! H-how can I win your heart, Noela?”

“Dunno. *Have to be Master.*”

Ejil hung his head with an odd expression. “I see. This is your way of encouraging me.”

“Nope.”

“If I learn to make potions, like Dr. Reiji, you’ll fall in love with me!”

“Nope.”

“You want me to put my nose to the grindstone!”

“Nope.”

Noela's thoughts were consistent, but Ejil wasn't even trying to listen. He jumped at her, attempting to embrace her. "Noelaaaa!"

"Garroooo! *Stay back!*" With a wag of her tail, Noela fended him off in midair.

"Blaaaugh!" Ejil flew through the house door, landing in the hallway. "I am the demon...who will one day conquer the world..."

When it came to Ejil and Noela, this truth juice was ultimately pointless. Noela only said what was on her mind, and Ejil only heard what he wanted to hear. On the other hand, Mina was the kind of person whose inner thoughts I wouldn't want to listen to.

"Oh, my. Is this a brand-new treatment, Mr. Reiji? Let me have a sip."

"Huh?" I turned around to see Mina drinking from the bottle of truth juice.

"Oh! It's a bit sweet!" Mina exclaimed. "*It's delicious!*"

"G-great," I mumbled, anxious about hearing Mina's thoughts.

She spotted the demon king. "Ejil? You'll catch cold if you nap there," she warned him. "*Hey! Aren't you supposed to be working? Why the hell are you asleep?!*"

Eek. Mina's inner thoughts were tough.

As Noela took cover behind me, I heard the werewolf girl think, "*Mina scary!*"

"Noela, dear, did you just say that I'm scary?" Mina asked. "*I can hear you!*"

Noela shook her head rapidly. "*Said it! Mina scary!*"

"Gosh! What about me is scary?" Mina laughed. "*There she goes—hiding behind Mr. Reiji again. Why does he always baby her so much?!*"

I quickly stood up straight. "You have my deepest apologies, Mina. I won't baby Noela anymore."

"Huh? Pardon me? What's going on, Mr. Reiji?" Mina asked. "*Seriously, what the hell?! I really need to finish prepping lunch and doing the laundry!*"

The fact that Mina was usually all smiles made her inner thoughts that much more terrifying. *I dub thee Dark Mina.*

“Mina...” I hesitated. “Er, I mean, Lady Mina...you should take a rest. Leave the chores to your adoring housemates.”

“*Lady Mina...? But, Mr. Reiji, those are my job. Argh! My shoulders are so stiff!*”

“Give her a shoulder massage, Noela!”

“Groo! *Gotcha!*” Noela darted behind Mina, sitting her down before rubbing her shoulders.

“What’s gotten into you, Noela? *Ah! That hurts a little. Farther left.*”

“Garroooo! *Okay! Left! Nice and slow!*”

While all this went on, I noticed Ejil wake up and slowly try to make his exit. I grabbed him by the shoulder. “And where do you think you’re going?”

“D-Doctor! Um, my shift is over, so I was heading home.”

“Your shift ain’t over yet. We’re going to survive this together, so get back to your position.”

“Okay...”

Noela, Ejil, and I cleaned and did the chores, giving Mina a wide berth. As for the store, well, I closed it temporarily. This was an emergency.

With the sharp blade of Mina’s thoughts hovering over us, we somehow finished cooking lunch. On the plates was the one entree I knew how to make—fried rice.

We sat down around the table, and Mina stared at her plate. I was a nervous wreck at this point.

“Hrm.” Mina took a bite. Noela, Ejil, and I watched in a cold sweat. “Ooh! This is delicious. *This isn’t bad.*”

“Doctor, we did it!”

“Thank goodness, Master!”

I shook hands with Ejil and Noela.

“*What’s gotten into everyone today? They’re all acting so weird.*” Mina didn’t

notice her thoughts leaking out as she munched the fried rice, smiling at us.

There was no way Kirio Drugs could sell this truth juice. If couples got their hands on it, it'd lead to huge fights. Dealing with the raw truth all the time was exhausting.

Sometimes, it's okay to lie a little.

Chapter 13:

The Battle Against Cs

EJIL WAS SUPPOSED to work later that day, so I watched the drugstore until I heard footsteps coming from the house.

“Master! Master!”

“What’s up, Noela? You okay?”

Noela was tearful. She hid behind my back, holding her tail and trembling.

“Seriously, did Mina yell at you or something?”

“No. That!”

I followed Noela’s index finger and found that she was pointing at one of *them*. The black creature skittered across the floor.

“Y-you bastards finally showed up!” I muttered.

I didn’t want to look at it any closer, nor did I want to use its actual name. I’d just call it “C.”

“M-Master, save me!”

“The p-problem is, Noela, I hate them, too.”

Nonetheless, this was our house, our drugstore. *As shopkeeper, it’s my responsibility to protect this place!*

Gulp.

I grabbed a broom and closed in on my target.

“Good luck, Master!”

That bastard isn’t moving...but why? Don’t tell me C is standing its ground?!

C’s antennae twitched.

I-It’s picking up on my disgust!

C didn’t crawl forward, however. I slowly inched closer, trying to move within

my broom's attack range.

Damn it. What incredible pressure! The closer I got, the shallower my breaths were. Meanwhile, C was completely still and silent. *Why does it seem so confident?! Wait. Could I be within C's line of fire already? Is its calm simply the confidence of a creature who knows that it has the upper hand? Can it defeat me anytime? Can it flee whenever it wants to?!*

That all made sense. Frankly, if I'd rated my athletic abilities from one to ten, I would've been a two. I hadn't been part of any school sports clubs, and I'd always skipped PE if I had the chance. I doubted that I could take C on head-to-head.

Twitch. Twitch. C swung its antennae.

Argh! Is it in an attack stance? Is it trying to keep me still? Or maybe it's gonna take off?!

"Master! Master! Good luck!"

I turned toward Noela and nodded. *That's right. I have people I need to protect. I lack C's attack power, but...as a man, there are fights I can't back down from or lose!*

Slowly closing the distance between C and myself had been the right move. Two meters now separated us, and C was within my broom's attack range.

I held up the broom and brought it crashing down on the beast, crying, "Hiyaaah!"

Thwaaap!

The broom attack echoed through the drugstore, but it wasn't enough. My critical strike had missed.

Skitter! Skitter!

I followed the creepy sound of C moving, only to look down and find its antennae twitching near my toes.

"Gah! Gross! Get away! I can't do this anymore! Nope! Bye!" I dropped my broom and cowered. *Sorry, I'm too scared for this!*

“Master...!”

“Noela...!”

We were trembling in a corner when, suddenly, a new challenger arrived.

“Good morning!” Ejil was here.

Oh, right. It’s time for his shift.

“Huh? Doctor? Noela? What’s up?”

“Ejil, your first chore today is to defeat C! You can do it, right?”

“Eh?” Ejil looked where I was pointing. He paled and spun around. “Oh, right. I forgot! I don’t have a shift today.”

“Uh, you definitely do!”

“See you guys later!”

“Wait! Hold on!”

A teleportation circle appeared, and *woosh*, Ejil was gone.

That bastard ran away! I thought, stunned.

Suddenly, Mina appeared. “Mr. Reiji, Noela, what’s wrong? I thought I heard someone scream.”

“Mina, watch out! C’s on the lam! Try not to panic. You should go back to the house!”

Mina tilted her head. Spotting C, she pulled off one slipper. “Take this!”

The only part of this attack that I caught with my own two eyes was Mina swinging her slipper downward. In the next instant, I heard a smack. Mina put her slipper back on. C was on the floor, dead.

“Wh-what just happened?! Noela, did you see...?”

“Noela knows! Cockroach died!”

One of Kirio Drugs’ counter girls was a *C slayer*.

“What’s wrong, you two?” Mina looked puzzled. “I’ve seen lots of bugs around lately. Every time I spot one, I make a point of killing it.”

Picking up the broom I'd dropped, Mina swept C's carcass outside matter-of-factly.

"Er..." I gulped. "We get that many 'C's around here?"

"They're called Cs? Yes, we get plenty!"

"Supposedly, if you see one of them, there are at least a hundred more," I muttered.

Just imagining it sent a chill down my spine. Even Noela trembled, curling up.

"Listen, Mina. Don't underestimate them," I continued. "They cling to life more stubbornly than any human. They even say that, when humans go extinct, Cs will still be around."

"Th-they're that tough, huh?" Even our resident C Slayer seemed overwhelmed. Then she shook her head and clenched her fists. "D-don't worry! I'll protect you both."

She's a true heroine! I thought, awed. "Just don't underestimate Cs. In *Terra Formars*, Martian Cs are even more powerful than humans!"

"Martian Cs?"

"Remember that they're horrific beasts with tons of potential!"

Mina swallowed loudly. She understood the gravity of our situation. "Wh-what should we do, Mr. Reiji? Cs will take over the drugstore!"

"No worries, Mina. I'm going to make an anti-C insecticide!"

Noela's ears twitched. She stood up. "Noela help!"

Noela and I left the store to Mina, heading to the lab. My werewolf buddy was more driven than ever, so it didn't take long to finish the new product.

C Destroyer: Insecticide gas. Annihilates insects harmful to humans or cattle.

The bottled fluid would apparently vaporize once it made contact with the air. Based on its description, I figured it would also be effective against centipedes

and ticks.

“All right, Noela. It’s done!”

“Now we win!”

I nodded firmly. *Goodbye, Cs!*

We closed the drugstore early for the day, shutting the doors and windows leading outside. Then I placed the C Destroyer in the center of the house—the living room. I opened the bottle, and the insecticide began to vaporize.

I assumed it would take a while to do its thing, so the girls and I had dinner at the Rabbit Tavern, then hung out for a bit before going home.

I knew the C Destroyer should work just fine; I imagined that the insects had either skittered off or died. Still, considering our impressive enemy, I couldn’t help worrying a little.

Once we reached the drugstore, Mina turned to me. “I’m going to do a quick clean around the house. Then you and Noela can come in.” Our resident C Slayer smiled angelically and entered the war zone.

“Mina sure is reliable, huh?” I breathed.

“Arroo.”

We heard Mina sweeping inside as she opened one window after another. Before long, however, things went quiet.

Did something happen? I held my hand to my ear, trying to listen. Lo and behold, I heard voices conversing in the house.

Noela and I looked at each other nervously before we entered. I left her to clean the storefront, heading to the living room. “Mina? Is everything okay?”

Mina was sitting on the sofa. “Ah! Mr. Reiji!”

Across from her sat a strange-looking older man, probably around fifty. What about him was strange? Well, he had two long, antenna-like things coming from his head, he held some sort of pipe, and on his back was a reddish-brown capelet. I thought that maybe he was wearing a bodysuit, but I didn’t see any seams or zippers. *Is he cosplaying or something?*

At that point, I finally used my identification skill to figure the weird old man out.

The C-Father: Head of the C family.

I hesitated.

“Let me introduce you!” Mina exclaimed. “Mr. Reiji, this is Mr. C-Father. Um, Mr. C-Father, this is the owner of Kirio Drugs, Mr. Reiji.”

“Uh, nice to meet you,” I said awkwardly. *So, um, this guy’s a C? He’s kind of human-sized...and he looks like a gangster.*

The C-Father took a moment to exhale some smoke. “This is your house, young man?”

Jeez. He even sounds like a yakuza.

“Yes, that’s right.”

“I thought this was a nice little spot, so I moved my family in. Then, all of a sudden, the place filled with god-awful smoke.” C-Father narrowed his eyes, looking distraught. “Thanks to that, my family’s scattered to the wind.”

I shook my head. “Okay, sorry, but can I get a time-out?”

“What is it?” Mina asked me.

“Who *is* that?” I whispered so that the strange creature across from us couldn’t hear.

“Mr. C-Father. He said as much a moment ago,” Mina reminded me. “Your C Destroyer put his family through the wringer.”

“I mean...that’s why I made it.”

“The problem is, they can’t live here anymore,” Mina continued.

“Yeah. That’s why I made the C Destroyer,” I repeated. I couldn’t help just wanting C-Father to leave. *Why the hell is he so tough-looking? And why is he smoking?!*

I heard the C-Father's gravelly voice. "Humans die of smoke inhalation during fires, right? Well, smoke's poisonous to *us*, too."

Says the guy smoking a pipe as we speak. "Look, this is my house. Could you kindly leave? Hosting you isn't hygienic."

"Listen here, young man—what do you say to keepin' me as a pet?"

"No way."

"Heh heh heh! I hear you make medicine. If you unlock the secret of my family's longevity, you'll be—"

"Nah. I'm good. And if you don't leave, I'll put out more C Destroyer."

"If this dweeb takes me in, I can rebuild my family easy," C-Father told Mina. "Heh heh heh!"

"Um...you do realize I can hear you, right?" I sighed. "Why're you so attached to this place?"

"There's a reason we Cs have to live here!" C-Father declared. "Wait...no, there isn't."

"Seriously?" I rolled my eyes. "Mina, handle this."

"All right!" She took off a slipper and smacked the C-Father. "Yah!"

That's literally the perfect slap in the face, I mused.

The C-Father widened his eyes, stunned. "That slipper felt like a bolt of lightning! Young lady...are you the Slipper Striker?"

"Er, what?" I asked.

"Most likely," Mina responded.

"Whoa." The C-Father squinted, then chuckled. "My entire family got done in by the Slipper Striker...?"

"Well, I had work to do."

The C-Father slowly shook his head. "I get it now," he said regretfully. "I'm up against a superweapon."

Er...we bought those slippers at the general store, and they were on sale. Him

treating them like some legendary sword was kind of awkward.

“I’m not young anymore,” sighed the C-Father. “I’ll take this ceasefire and retreat.” Standing, he skittered into the drugstore.

“Garrooo?!”

Seeing the C-Father, Noela jumped away in shock. I didn’t blame her. A strange, crab-walking old dude had appeared out of nowhere, after all.

“Sorry for the intrusion, beast girl,” the C-Father said gruffly. “Fear not. My family won’t come near here anymore!”

He turned his back and waved as he left the drugstore. Noela and I watched his reddish-brown back grow distant.

“Mina...?”

“Yes?”

“He was a C, right? Not some old guy cosplaying?”

“I’d say that’s a safe assumption, since he introduced himself as the C-Father.”

Yeah. Even my identification skill confirmed that. I’d certainly learned a lot from this. “There are all kinds of Cs out there, huh?”

Noela nodded deeply, seemingly thinking the same thing.

I guess it made sense that the C-Father was so intimidating. Wait...did that make sense? Now that I thought about it, that huge C had been in the house this whole time. It sent a chill down my spine. *He said that he wouldn’t let his family near the drugstore. Is he steering clear of my C Destroyer?*

Either way, after that little discussion, we never saw his family members again. One way or the other, we’d managed to drive the Cs out of Kirio Drugs.

Chapter 14:

The Fluffy Lady's Surprise

MINA AND NOELA were in charge of the drugstore today, so I hit up the general store.

"Hey, Reiji!" called the manager, Alf. Then he made a ridiculous request, finishing, "...can you do something?"

I shook my head. "I doubt it. You'll need to take care of them yourself."

"I'll give you all the bottles, thread, dowels, and rice you want! Just—"

"Supplies aren't the problem, Alf. I literally *can't* make a magical treatment. Something that does all the chores instantly isn't *medicine*."

"I see." Alf let out a sigh of clear disappointment.

This all started because his wife blew up at him for never doing housework. And Alf had no experience with housekeeping, so when he tried to help, he just made things worse.

Still, his wife was pregnant, and they already had four little ones. It was asking a lot of a mother-to-be to handle all the chores while taking care of a bunch of kids.

"Alf, we don't live in an era where it's okay for husbands to bring home the bacon and do nothing else. You gotta meet her in the middle."

Says the guy who has Mina handle all the chores, I thought. That was fine, though. Mina enjoys the housework. Besides, she's not pregnant, and we aren't raising kids.

"But I just get in the way," Alf said defensively.

"Have you considered hired help?"

"My wife's against it. She wants to save our money for the kids, so she tries to do everything herself."

Now, that's one hell of a wife.

“There are chores I just can’t do,” he continued. “Ain’t all folks like that?”

“Nobody starts off able to do everything. You gotta work at it,” I retorted.

As I tried to motivate Alf, his wife poked her head into the shop. “Oh, my! Long time no see, Reiji.”

“Yeah! Glad you’re doing well.”

“You must stay for lunch. We owe you so much!”

“Well, I suppose I’ll accept your kind offer. But it’s not like you folks haven’t helped me out a ton!”

Mina was probably making lunch too, but I’d feel bad if I turned Alf’s wife down. *I’ll have a bite here, then go home and eat more.*

Alf stood and stretched. “All right! I wonder what’s for lunch.”

“You have to watch the store, don’t you?” his wife replied. “You can have yours after.”

“Fine...” Alf sighed, then sat patiently. In terms of the family hierarchy, it looked like the wives wore the pants even in this world.

I nodded to Alf and then followed his wife into the dining room. On the table were several platters topped with the foods you’d serve a family.

“That dishwashing stuff you made has been a huge help, Reiji,” Alf’s wife told me.

“Oh, you’ve been using it? I’m glad to hear that.”

Alf’s youngest, who was about a year and a half old, was apparently asleep. His other little ones waddled toward me. A four-year-old girl tugged and tugged at my cuff. “Where’s fluffy lady?”

Alf’s oldest boy—probably a first-grader’s age—came over, pulling his toddler sister by the hand. “Beast lady isn’t here?”

Alf’s kids loved Noela, but she had a hard time with them; they petted and pulled at her thoughtlessly. “Not today. She’s watching the drugstore for me.”

“Aw...” The kids frowned, disappointed.

They sat at the table, and lunch began. Kids their age ate messily; I watched as they dirtied their clothes over the course of the meal. Alf's wife warned them about their messiness, but some things weren't quick fixes, and she struggled to get them to listen to her.

It was refreshing to join a big family meal like this. I'd gotten used to Mina's cooking—I loved it, of course, but somehow it had ended up on the same tier as my mom's cooking back home. Just having something different was a fun change.

"You know, the fluffy lady's probably bored stiff at the drugstore," I told the kids. "After we finish eating, wanna come over and play?"

"Yeah!" the kids exclaimed.

"Are you sure, Reiji?" Alf's wife asked. "They'll be a handful."

"It's totally fine. Noela's probably sleeping on the job." When I wasn't there, she napped on the living room sofa or in my bed, so taking these little monsters with me would serve her right.

After finishing lunch, the kids changed their shirts. I peeked into the other room; Alf's wife had already started washing their dirty clothes.

She was using a soap the drugstore sold. Still, she had to put her back into scrubbing. There were no machines in this world, so all the laundry was done by hand in a tub of water. Since she had to clean every family member's clothes, the laundry was more hard labor than a chore.

"Okay, I'll take the kids now!" I called. "I'll have them back by this evening."

"Thank you so much!"

"How long does it usually take you to wash all that, ma'am?"

"Hmm...let's see. I'm cleaning three shirts today, so it'll take something like half an hour," she replied with a big smile. "They always get their clothes this dirty, so I'm used to it." She added that the morning laundry usually took an hour and a half, all by hand.

"I'm going to create some stuff that'll make the laundry easier for you."

"Oh, my. You can do that?"

“Leave it to me. I’ll be back later.” I left the general store with the three Noela Killers in tow, heading home.

Noela must’ve eaten lunch already; she was sprawled over the counter, sleeping peacefully. *Shouldn’t she be watching the store?*

As the Noela Killers spotted her, their eyes sparkled. *Heh heh...they’re so excited. This is your punishment for laziness, Noela. Get ready for hell.*

“All right, kids!” I cried, unleashing the Noela Killers. “Go wake up the fluffy lady!”

“Yay!” The three dashed straight over to my werewolf.

Noela’s ears twitched as they approached, sensing danger. “Arrroooo?!” she exclaimed, waking up.

“Let us pet you, fluffy lady!”

“I’m gonna hug her tail!”

“I’m gonna poke her cute ears!”

Noela stood so quickly, she knocked her chair over. “No touch! No pull!” She bolted into the house.

Damn, she’s fast.

However, the kids weren’t going to quit so easily. They quickly waddled after her, beginning a fluffy game of tag—Noela versus the Noela Killers. Things got loud in the house, but it was kind of nice.

Mina poked her head in. “Welcome home, Mr. Reiji.” Hearing a strange sound, she turned. “Um...what’s going on with those children?”

“Oh, they’re Alf’s,” I replied. “They’re here to play with Noela. Well, more like *bother* Noela.”

“Hee hee! Sounds like they’re having fun.”

“Alf’s wife treated me to lunch,” I continued. “Jeez, she was cooking, doing laundry, looking after the kids... I don’t envy her.”

“Oh. You already had lunch? Um, I made some for you, but I’ll go clean up.” Mina smiled awkwardly and headed back to the kitchen.

Crap. I messed up. Scratching my head, I followed her to try and fix things.

Mina was nowhere to be found. I looked up, thinking that maybe she'd attached herself to the kitchen ceiling, but no. Had she gone shopping? The bag she usually brought wasn't here, so that was probably it. Unfortunately, that meant that she'd left me here feeling sheepish.

"I guess I'll get to work," I mumbled, heading to the lab.

I mixed the required ingredients as usual, producing a detergent.

Laundry Detergent: Strong soap. Eliminates stains and grime without scrubbing.

"Perfect. This should help Alf's wife a bit." I nodded at the glowing bottle.

Just then, Noela yelped from another room. "Gaah! Bug off!"

Sounds like she's been caught. Hearing the children's happy cheers, I poked my head into the living room. As I expected, they were roughhousing with Noela. *Yup, they're getting along.*

"No pulling out tail fur! Ow!" Noela looked at me, half in tears. "Master, save me!"

"This is punishment for sleeping on the job, buddy." Joining the children, I pinched Noela's cheeks. "All right, I'm heading back to Alf's. Keep watching the drugstore, okay?"

"Master, *save me!*"

Ka-thunk! I closed the door behind me and headed out.

At the general store, I called, "Hey, I'm back!" Looking inside, I saw Alf eating a late lunch at the counter.

She's making him work while he eats, huh? That's tough in its own way.

"What's up, Reiji?" Alf asked, laughing. "Oh, I know. The little ones exhausted you, so you came here to rest, right?"

I shook my head and corrected him, then headed to the kitchen. Alf's wife was preparing dinner. "Oh, Reiji, you're already finished?"

"Yup!" I showed her the detergent. "This should make laundry a lot easier."

"Oh?"

I decided it'd be fastest just to show her. The bucket of water she was using for laundry was beside the bath; I put in some detergent and submerged the kids' garments. "It can get rid of stains without you scrubbing the clothes."

"That can't be."

Alf's wife appeared doubtful, but the grime on the fabric rinsed out bit by bit. *Wow. This detergent works well enough to impress even me, and I made the stuff.*

Unable to process the product's usefulness, Alf's wife trembled. "I-It's all coming out!" She grabbed my shoulders and shook me. "You must've used cleaning magic, right?!"

"Um, could you stop shaking me, please? All I used was laundry detergent. It's not magic. Anyone can use this stuff."

Calming her nerves, I had her try the detergent. One outfit, two outfits—just like that, all the children's clothes were clean.

"It's like I'm dreaming," she gasped, clearly impressed. "You're right, Reiji. Laundry is going to be way easier now. Thank you so much."

"It's my pleasure."

"Even that worthless husband of mine will be able to wash clothes now. Make sure you pitch in with housework too, Reiji. Got it?"

"Y-you think I should help? Mina likes doing the chores."

"What're you talking about?" Alf's wife sighed. "Even if she likes chores, you should help. Don't come crying to me if she gets tired of cleaning for you and runs off!"

She said it jokingly, but it scared me stiff. *Runs off...? Mina would never do that...right? Wait—she vanished without saying a word earlier. She made lunch*

for me, and I thoughtlessly ate somewhere else! Oh, no...was that the last straw?

I imagined Mina shrieking, *"I can't take this anymore! I'm not Mr. Reiji's servant!"*

It's possible.

Alf had been listening to my conversation with his wife. He chuckled. "A bit of advice, Reiji. Apologize, and really put your heart into it. It never hurts to grovel!"

He gave me a thumbs-up with a pearly-white smile, but nothing about him remotely reassured me. Panicking, I fled the general store.

Once I'd dashed back to Kirio Drugs, I noticed that things were oddly quiet. The kitchen and living room were both empty. Checking the lab, I found Alf's kids and Noela napping.

"Oh, Mr. Reiji! Where did you head off to?"

Hearing a familiar voice behind me, I swung around. "Whoa! M-Mina!"

"Is something wrong? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Ha ha! Very funny. Thank goodness you're back," I sighed. "I swear, Alf's wife scared the crap out of me."

"I just went out to buy ingredients so I could bake the kids cookies."

"I-Is that so? Cool, cool..." I fell on my butt, completely drained. "Are there any chores I can help with, Mina? Cleaning the dishes? Doing laundry?"

"I'm perfectly capable of taking care of things on my own," she replied. "I know you're busy with work, Mr. Reiji. Oh—I get it! You want more allowance, don't you?"

"No! That's not it! Since when am I a schoolkid on summer vacation?!" I told Mina exactly what Alf's wife had said to me.

Mina gaped. "She thinks I'll leave you? That's why you're asking about the chores?"

"Are you getting sick of me...?" I asked hesitantly.

“Hee hee!” Kneeling, Mina embraced me gently. “Never. I love you and this house, Mr. Reiji. Gracious, you were worried about that? You have quite a cute side.”

She gently stroked my head. Our roles were usually reversed, so it kind of embarrassed me.

“All right. I’m going to bake some cookies,” Mina informed me. “Could you give me a hand?”

“Anything you want!”

The cookies were a huge hit with Noela and the kids. That evening, we all walked Alf’s little ones back to the general store.

After that day, Mina had me do simple chores around the house. I recognized that she would’ve gotten them done faster. But...

“Don’t come crying to me if she gets tired of cleaning for you and runs off!”

I was sure Mina was giving me chores so that I wouldn’t worry about her leaving. *Jeez. What an incredible girl.*

Chapter 15:

The Winter Medicine

“**H**OLY CRAP, it’s hot.” I rested my head on the counter, glaring at the sunny outdoors. “What the hell’s going on with the weather?”

I’d wrapped up in the meadow earlier; it hadn’t been nearly so scorching this morning. Now, though, just sitting still made me sweat.

A voice answered my complaints. “Hot because Noela climbed on you, Master.”

I looked over my shoulder and realized that, at some point, Noela had jumped on my back. She wagged her tail happily.

I was wondering why it was extra hot, you damn fluffy werewolf.

“Could you maybe get off?” I grabbed the scruff of her neck and tossed her away. Of course, she landed perfectly. *It was hot even before she jumped on me.*

Rrrumble. A familiar carriage stopped in front of the drugstore. A young woman took a servant’s hand, alighting from the carriage. She cheerfully brushed a drill-shaped curl off her shoulder. “I’m here, Sir Reiji!”

“Hi, Elaine.”

“Good day!” Elaine skipped toward the drugstore counter, clearly excited. As usual, she wore perfume from Kirio Drugs.

How can she be so energetic in this heat?

“Why here today, Drills?” Noela demanded.

“Oh! Good day, Noela. I actually haven’t visited to play with you.”

Noela blocked Elaine’s path to me. “No play with Master. *Noela* play with Master.”

“I’m not going to play with *either* of you.” Elaine giggled, standing up straight.

“Unfortunately, Noela, I can’t play every day like you. As Lord Valgas’s daughter, I’m extremely busy.”

She was probably talking about a few chores and errands, puffing them up into real “work.”

“I’ve come here with an important order, Sir Reiji,” she continued. “Father wants a prescription for wintertime.”

“A what? Oh...he wants to order something to end the summer, because it’s been so disgustingly hot lately?”

Elaine nodded.

“Impossible,” I barked. *I seriously wish people in this world understood the difference between magic and medicine.*

Elaine shrugged. “Father told me that alchemists only get to work after claiming something’s impossible.”

“He’s one step ahead of me,” I sighed. “Changing the season to winter...” *That’d require a super-high magic level. You’d need the power of a god.*

“No bother Master,” Noela insisted. “Drills, stop.”

Whap! Whap! She smacked Elaine with her soft tail.

“Ah ha ha! Noela! That tickles! It’s too hot for this!”

The two roughhoused a bit. *I’m glad they’re getting along so well.*

“Ah!” I exclaimed.

“What is it, Sir Reiji? Did you come up with something?!”

“I can’t get rid of summer, but I might be able to make it nice and cool.”

“O-oh my word!” Elaine gasped. “That’s incredible, Sir Reiji!”

“It won’t last very long, though.”

Leaving the drugstore to Noela, I retreated to the lab. The window was open, but the breeze was lukewarm.

Time to bring some winter to Elaine’s dad. If I’d already created this, I’d be using it right now, I mused. *It’s guaranteed to sell out in this heat.*

I heard Mina at the lab entrance. “Are you all right, Mr. Reiji?”

“Yeah,” I replied, facing away from her as I worked.

I felt a gust of wind on my back. Turning around, I saw Mina waving a paper fan.

“How’s this feel?” she asked. “Any cooler?”

“Much better. Thanks, Mina.” She must’ve been boiling, too.

All right. Just hang in there, Mina. I’ll cool you down with my new creation.

I shook the bottle, and as usual, its contents glowed.

Icy Gel: Absorbs heat as it evaporates, cooling the skin.

I’ll test it on myself first, I thought, brushing some icy gel on my arm. “Whoa! It’s freezing!”

I walked behind Mina, who was obviously puzzled. “What exactly did you make, Mr. Reiji?”

“You’ll see in a sec. Could you move your hair away from your neck?” I’d heard that chilling your neck was the fastest way to cool your whole body.

“My neck...? S-sure. But...um...don’t do anything steamy, okay?”

“How could I do something steamy to your *neck*?”

Mina pulled her hair over her shoulder, allowing me access to the nape of her smooth, white neck. *Jeez, this is pretty steamy. No! Bad Reiji!* I shook my head. Applying some icy gel to a brush, I gently spread it over Mina’s skin.

“Hey, that tickles, Mr. Reiji!” Mina yelped, shivering. “I-It’s so cold! What’d you do?!”

“It’s a treatment that cools patches of your skin. It’ll reduce the heat for a bit.”

“I see!” Mina touched her neck and then spread some icy gel on her arms. “Wow, this is quite c-cold...but if you use a small amount, it’s incredibly refreshing!”

“Right?”

I hear thumps from behind the lab door.

“Wait, Noela! You can’t just go into Sir Reiji’s lab!”

“Mina! Master! Hanky-panky for sure!”

“That’s all the more reason not to open the door!”

Noela must’ve gotten the wrong idea from Mina’s cry a second ago. I opened the door to clear up any misconceptions. Elaine and Noela stood in the hall; the young noblewoman was trying to listen in, while the werewolf girl peeked into the lab through any hole she could find.

So, Elaine’s an eavesdropper, huh? I frowned at them. “Didn’t I ask you to watch the shop?”

“No mess around!” Noela snapped.

“I’m not! Mina shrieked because she tried some of this.” I showed the girls the bottle of icy gel.

Elaine got particularly excited. “The winter medicine is done?!”

“It’s quite cool and refreshing,” Mina told her.

I looked victoriously at Noela and Elaine. “That’s what Mina says. Raise your hand if you want to try it!”

“Me, me!” Both girls hopped up and down.

Jeez, talk about hyper. I’d let them both try it, obviously. I applied some icy gel to their necks.

“Garroooo?!”

“Th-this’s...so cold!”

The two girls shivered.

“Master, more! More, please!”

Seriously? Sure, why not. I applied icy gel to Noela’s arms, tummy, and thighs.

“Frozen! No hot! Amazing, Master!”

Noela dashed around the lab like Mario with a Super Star; it was nice to see.

“Me as well, Sir Reiji! Hurry!”

“Don’t rush me.” I spread more gel on Elaine’s skin.

Her whole body trembled. “It’s so chilly! Ooh—but it’s also refreshing! I can’t help wanting to move around!”

“Hey, if you two are gonna go nuts, do it outside.” Pushing them outdoors, I came back in. Mina was hugging her knees. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m t-too cold, M-Mr. Reiji.”

“Even though it’s hot out?” *Whoa. She’s seriously shivering.*

Mina sneezed.

Wait. Does this stuff work too well? Did it give her a chill? I grabbed a towel and wiped the icy gel off her.

“Aah...” Mina sighed like she was getting into a hot bath. She looked nice and warm now. “I feel like it just went from winter to summer.”

“Man...that was a close call. You might’ve gotten sick.” I wiped my sweat away with my hand.

Wait...didn’t the girls use even more icy gel than Mina?

Concerned, I headed outside to find Elaine and Noela in direct sunlight, leaning on one another and shivering.

“S-so...c-cold...”

I knew it!

“Noela...sleepy...”

“You mustn’t go to sleep...!”

“Master...here...”

“Hang in there, Noela...! You’re hallucinating... Mr. Reiji wouldn’t be outside right now...!”

Both girls were freezing below the summer sun.

I had Mina hurriedly draw a hot bath while I picked up Noela, carrying Elaine piggyback.

“Noela...done for...Master...”

“You’re going to catch a cold at this rate. You too, Elaine.”

“I’ve always longed for you...Sir Reiji...”

“Yeah, yeah. You’ll be okay. Nobody’s freezing to death today.”

I brought the two to the bathroom and left the rest to Mina. Fortunately, both girls exited nice and warm, no signs of hypothermia to be found.

I gave Elaine the icy gel and told her to bring it to Lord Valgas. “He has to make sure he doesn’t use too much,” I warned sternly. “No matter what, got it?”

“I-I understand! I’ll make sure to tell Father what you said.”

Being sweaty sucked, but so did freezing. *Too much of a good thing, right?*

A few days later, Lord Valgas’s butler came to the drugstore to buy cold medicine. It turned out that the icy gel had made Elaine’s father sick.

Man. I warned him, too—don’t use too much, no matter what. I couldn’t have stressed the point harder. What a dummy.

Chapter 16:

Mina's Answer

THIS MORNING, I'd dragged Ejil to the meadow to look after the medicinal herbs and pick what we needed for the lab.

While we headed home, he asked, "So, Doctor, you grow the ingredients for those delicious potions yourself, right?!" He literally held a piece of paper and a pen so he could jot down notes.

"Yup," I said. "If I don't, I can't get that refreshing flavor."

I was just kind of making things up; herbs from the forest didn't work any differently. I couldn't help feeling a little guilty watching the boy take fervent notes.

It was cooler now compared to the summer, but there were still really hot days, like today. Ejil and I sweated buckets as we walked home chatting.

Noela was watching the drugstore for me. She came over with a towel. "Welcome home, Master! Wipe sweat."

"Oh, thanks."

She watched me towel off, then nodded. "Hard labor sweat! Manly."

"You think?" I tilted my head inquisitively.

Ejil, meanwhile, wiped his sweaty face with his hand, trying his hardest to act cool. "*Noela!* Wh-what about my sweat? Me, the man's-man demon king...?"

"Hm?" Noela exuded apathy.

I'm not sure it's possible for her to care less.

Ejil extended his left hand to Noela "smoothly."

I don't think she'll ever put a towel there, I mused. "Is Mina cleaning? Or cooking?"

"Dunno."

She doesn't know? If Mina had gone shopping, she would've said something to Noela. And if she were doing chores, she'd be nearby. What was going on?

Ejil was still frozen in the same pose. I tossed him my towel. "I've barely used it, so...uh...there you go. Noela's the one who washed it last."

"A towel full of Noela's love...?!" Ejil rubbed his cheek against it.

Wait. Noela was in charge of the laundry two days ago. Yesterday was me...whoops.

"It's so soft," Ejil murmured. "It smells so pure. That...that's Noela's work! I-I'm so happy!"

Sorry about that, Ejil, I apologized internally and then entered the house to look for Mina. Tomorrow, I needed her to head to the meadow alone, so I wanted to let her know.

If Noela's not sure where she is, Mina's probably in spirit form. And if she isn't in the kitchen or the living room...

I knocked on the door to the girls' shared room. Since I got no response, I headed in. Mina was sleeping on one of the side-by-side beds.

"Hunh. That's rare. Mina usually doesn't oversleep."

She rolled toward me, and I noticed that her face was oddly red. Her breathing was also shallow, and the breaths were coming faster than they should.

"Mina?"

She seemed to hear me; she slowly opened her eyes. "Ah... Mr. Reiji. Good... morning."

Mina tried to sit up, but I quickly stopped her, placing my hand on her forehead. *Whoa! She's feverish! Can humans even get this hot?! I guess she's a ghost, not a human...*

"Are you feeling okay, Mina?"

"I'm...totally fine." She gave me a weak smile and once again tried to sit up.

I made her lie back down. "Today, you're resting. No—for the next three days.

I bet running yourself ragged this summer has caught up to you. Leave the housework to Noela and me—and that oddly useful demon part-timer.”

Mina had been doing all the chores, even while helping in the meadow. It was clear that she’d been working too hard.

“But...chores are my life’s work!” she protested.

“You’re already dead.”

“Meanie,” she sniffled.

If she’d caught a cold, I could whip up some meds. Unfortunately, I was no doctor, and I didn’t know whether ghosts *could* catch colds. I decided to make Mina rest for the next few days until I figured out what was going on.

I took some of the icy gel I’d made the other day and rubbed a bit on Mina’s forehead. It seemed to work; she closed her eyes with a slightly more relaxed expression.

I’m gonna skip today’s lab work and focus on chores. Noela and Ejil can watch the store.

I headed to the kitchen and prepared lunch for Mina—rice porridge, since she was sick. I tasted it, but I had no idea whether a talented cook like her would like it.

Informing Noela and Ejil that lunch was ready, I took a bowl of porridge to Mina’s room. I placed it on the dresser, dragging a chair next to her bed and sitting down.

“Mr. Reiji?”

“Ah—sorry. I didn’t mean to wake you, but I made some lunch. Think you can have a bite?”

“Yes,” Mina murmured.

I helped her sit up, placing the tray in her lap. She pulled her blanket up to her face.

“Could you spoon-feed me?” she requested, gazing at me.

“Huh?” I said self-consciously. “Can’t you eat it yourself?”

“It’s not that I can’t. It’s just that, at times like this, I’d like to be doted on a little.” She covered her face with her blanket. “So, please...?”

“I guess that’s not too much to ask. Come on, stop hiding under that blanket.”

I brought a spoonful of porridge toward Mina’s face. She closed her eyes and opened her mouth, taking a bite.

“How is it?” I asked. “I’m not too confident about the flavor.”

“Tasty. You got the saltiness just right.”

Relieved, I spoonfed her another three bites. *I feel like a mother bird feeding her chick.*

Mina lay back, looking at the ceiling. “I’ve used this room for a very long time. I looked up at this ceiling for so long, I eventually got tired of it. It hasn’t changed at all.”

“No?” Mina had said that she was sickly when she was alive.

“Mom always took care of me,” she continued. “I was quite a burden. It was my fault my family couldn’t go anywhere. Dad, my younger brother...”

Being under the weather is probably making her nostalgic.

“Still, I ended up dying before everyone else.” Mina’s tears began to flow freely.

I embraced her and held her, gently caressing her back. “It’s okay. Everything’s fine. I bet nobody ever considered you a burden. You just feel like that because you’re sick.”

“I got in the way of m-my own family’s happiness!”

Back when I first met Mina, she’d told me, *“I just want the residents here to lead happy lives.”*

Did she say that because “happy lives” were what she’d wanted for her family? Was that why Mina worked so hard around the house? To prove that she was useful, not a burden? Did her work ethic arise from personal guilt at seemingly robbing her family of their happiness? Why didn’t her own happiness seem to count?

Mina's tears dripped onto my shoulder. Her hands trembled like a lost child's. All I could do was gently stroke her blonde hair. "Hey, Mina. I'm not about to let you be sad. If you're not happy, neither are Noela and I."

Mina did her best to hold back her sobs.

There's got to be something I can do or say to help her feel less guilty. At the end of the day, though, the only thing I was good for was making medicine. I hadn't known Mina when she was alive, so I couldn't confirm that she hadn't been a burden or that her family wasn't unhappy.

After making sure Mina got to sleep, I left the girls' room and called Ejil. "Hey, mind if I ask you a favor?"

"What is it, Doctor? You sound serious."

"I'd like you to gather some materials. If you do..."

"I-If I do...?"

"You can pet Noela's tail."

Ejil grunted.

"You have a nosebleed, kid. Are you okay?"

"I-I'm fine! It's finally time to strut my stuff! I'll get what you need, Doctor, no matter what the cost! I created my army for this very day!"

Even an idiot would've known that was a lie. *I feel terrible for his army, but whatever.* I explained what I needed to Ejil.

"I shall be on my way!" he teleported away using his unique magic.

Since I had stuff to do, I couldn't just wait for Ejil to come back. Pushing the living room sofa aside, I headed into the basement. Mina had told me a while back that she'd given her mother her brooch, and I'd found it in the basement, so her mom must've used the room often.

There's gotta be something down here.

I searched the bookshelves and tables, and eventually came across a cracked, musty journal. It was so old that the ink had faded, and bugs had chewed the paper. It was basically unreadable, save for a small section. Judging by that

section's contents, the journal had once belonged to Mina's mom.

Perfect. I headed back to the living room.

Ejil had already returned with the ingredients I'd asked for. "Here you go, Doctor!"

"Oh, that was fast. Much obliged."

I opened the bag. *Great, he got everything. His poor army probably didn't enjoy running his random errands.* The power of Ejil's obsession with Noela was something to behold.

"Good work, kid." I grabbed a potion off the shelf and passed it to Ejil. *We're still treating these things like cans of soda.*

"Thanks! Um, Doctor, you said I could touch Noela's tail, right?"

"Yup. Be my guest."

"Bwa ha ha ha ha!" Ejil hid his face with his hand as he cackled. "Let me pet that saucy tail of yours, Noela!"

With a twisted grin, he dashed toward Noela, who was on store duty.

Oops. I forgot to tell him that I didn't exactly clear this with Noela. And, uh, why's he so crazy about her tail? Does he have a fetish? Whatever. Good luck, Ejil.

As I entered the lab to get started, I just barely heard voices coming from the store.

"Pet tail? No."

"Um, but, er, the doctor said—"

"Pervert!" *Wham!*

I heard something hard crash into something else, and then a scream like a frog being squished. "Blaaaugh!"

"Arroo! Dead...?"

Noela, do me a favor and tend his wounds, I sighed. If they're minor, a potion should work fine.

I focused on my work and somehow finished the new concoction. The ingredients only filled one bottle.

Three-Minute Resurrection: Materializes the lingering thoughts and feelings attached to an object for three minutes.

I decided to wait for Mina to recover before using the stuff.

The next morning, her temperature had dropped, and her color had mostly returned. Even so, she covered her face with her blanket and asked me to feed her again, extending my mother-bird role for another day.

Once Mina finished eating, we chatted a little before I finally brought up the Three-Minute Resurrection, explaining that it could summon her mother for a limited period of time.

“Whether you use it is up to you, Mina. If you don’t want to, I won’t force you.”

Mina looked through the journal I’d found yesterday. “This is Mom’s handwriting, but I can barely read any of it.”

Since she couldn’t decipher the journal, she couldn’t know what her mother had written. It was entirely possible that the volume was full of complaints. *Worst-case scenario, it’s all stuff that’ll break Mina’s heart.*

After thinking for a moment, Mina nodded. “I’m going to use the Three-Minute Resurrection.”

With my eyes alone, I asked whether she was really okay with that.

“I want to know what Mom thought about me, no matter what it was,” Mina confirmed. “I’ll have to accept her feelings.”

I explained how the Three-Minute Resurrection worked and then made for the door.

Mina grabbed me. “Mr. Reiji...please hold my hand.”

“You got it.” *I knew it. She’s scared to be alone.*

Sitting on the chair next to the bed, I clasped Mina's hand tightly.

With a deep breath, Mina spread the resurrection fluid over her mother's small journal. The book shone slightly as a human figure appeared in the air. Color filled the image of the blonde-haired woman.

That's what Mina will look like in twenty years.

The woman furrowed her brow, clearly conflicted. "Just when we thought you were better, it's something else now? Why?! We don't have the money to buy more medicine!"

"I'm sorry." I heard Mina's quiet voice next to me. I squeezed her hand, trying to show her that I was there.

"Why aren't you tougher?" Mina's mother continued.

Mina gasped but refused to look away from her mother's image.

"We use all our savings on your medicine. We're lucky Morris never gets sick!"

"That's right. Morris was a good boy," Mina murmured. He must've been her little brother. "He was always so kind to me, even coming to my room to play."

Mina's mother shook her head. "And why does your father leave nursing you to me?"

"Yes...I was bedridden, and it was always you next to me. Caring for me must've been difficult." Mina could barely hold herself together anymore. She began to weep.

I'm sorry, Mina, I thought, wanting to curse the unfair, miserable situation she'd lived with. Why did it have to be her?

Mina apparently realized that her family initially had the money to lead happy lives. Yet because it all went toward treating Mina, as her mother said, they struggled to make ends meet. Mina was aware of that as well; that was why she felt so regretful and guilty.

"I knew it," she said. "I was just a burden on my family."

"Why won't you get better?" her mother continued.

“Don’t ask me that! I wasn’t like that because I wanted to be!”

“Why won’t the medicine work?”

“I don’t know!”

“Even the doctors can’t diagnose you. I just don’t know what to do anymore!”

“That’s why I died before everyone else! That was for the best, right?! I wasn’t a burden to you anymore!” Mina screamed, sobbing.

Her mother hid her face with both hands. “Oh, Mina...why must you die before me?” Her shoulders trembled. Through the gaps between her hands, I saw her crying. “You were supposed to get better. You had so much happiness waiting for you! In the end...I couldn’t nurse you back to health.”

Mina’s face tightened.

“You suffered the most of all of us, Mina...right?” Although her eyes were hidden behind her hands, she seemed to be looking at Mina. “I must’ve loved you with all my heart, my daughter.”

Tears once again flowed from Mina’s eyes. She bit her lip. “Lies...”

“Otherwise,” continued her mother, “how can I explain how empty I feel... how much it *hurts*?”

A slight gasp came from Mina’s shivering lips.

“We never got to talk about the boy you liked, like two friends hanging out. I never got to help make him cookies, like you would’ve wanted. We never fought because I wasn’t fond of him after you introduced us. I never got to see you off as a happily married bride.”

As the Three-Minute Resurrection’s time limit drew near, Mina’s mother began to fade.

“And that brooch I got from my mother, who got it from her mother...I never told you about its meaning. My mother gave me the brooch the day I married... She told me to do the same if I ever had a daughter. That was when she taught me the brooch’s true meaning...a wish for the owner’s happiness.”

Mina’s mother faded, but even I could tell that she was smiling at Mina. Mina

began to sob like a child.

I could barely see anything—the tears streaming down my face obscured my vision. Mina had told me about the brooch. *“It was something she gave me originally. She told me only to wear it on special occasions.”*

Mina’s mother might’ve considered Mina a burden in some ways, but that wasn’t everything. It wasn’t. She’d cared for Mina, worried about her, and wanted more for her—always and forever.

“Let my daughter find happiness...” Mina’s mother vanished, and her journal stopped shining.

I gently held Mina in my arms until she calmed down.

“Thank you so much, Mr. Reiji,” she wept.

I let go of her, wiping tears from her cheeks. “At the end of the day, she was your mom.”

Mina nodded. Holding my hand tightly, she gazed at where her mother’s figure had been. Tears still on her cheeks, she smiled. “Mom, I *am* happy.”



Chapter 17:

The Security-Balloon Battle

SINCE OUR HOUSE doubled as a drugstore, we were always at risk of being robbed.

“We should probably have a security system, huh?” I asked Mina. She was watching the store with me, since she’d finished her chores.

Noela, on the other hand, had her head in my lap as she slept. “Noela protect Master,” she murmured.

If Noela could watch the drugstore consistently, burglary wouldn’t be an issue. She spent a *lot* of the average day napping, though, so I was considering security measures for when Mina and I looked after the shop.

“Good idea,” Mina replied. “I could escape robbers in my astral body, but I worry about you, Mr. Reiji.”

“Right! When it comes to avoiding physical injuries, you’re actually the toughest of us three.”

“I don’t know how I feel about you calling me the ‘toughest,’ since I’m a delicate young girl,” Mina laughed, and then frowned at me. “If a burglar ever popped up here, even I would be terrified.”

“You’d scare them, if anything,” I replied. “Imagine a store’s counter girl just vanishing, and the merchandise starting to shake and float around.” Mina was a legit poltergeist. “I guess I’m the only one who actually needs security,” I concluded.

“I do, too!” Mina waved both hands, stubborn as a mule.

I’d once seen a news story that said banks held special training sessions on robberies and burglaries. *Jeez, it’d be great if the Red Cat Brigade offered a service where they ran over if something happened to your store.*

For the record, I still had a bottle of the capshin fluid I’d given the brigade to use against bandits. The problem was that the fluid was a double-edged sword

—you had to be upwind to use it.

Couldn't I come up with something less dangerous...? Ah!

“Mina, could you buy some water balloons from the general store?” I asked. If I remembered correctly, those were easy to find in this world; Alf had told me a while ago that he had a bunch left over from a festival.

“Sure,” Mina replied. “Are you going to use them for security?”

“Yup.”

“I see! Then I better get them as soon as possible. Mm-hmm! I need them, too, since it'd endanger us *both* if anyone broke in.”

Mina's really trying to sell me on her helplessness, huh?

Grabbing her wallet, Mina immediately made for the general store. I woke Noela up and left the storefront to her, then hunkered down in the lab.

I wasn't creating a weapon, or anything to attack a robber directly. Still, it'd be useful against criminals fleeing a scene, and having more than one would safeguard a store. A bunch of places in Kalta could use the somewhat-unique product—the general store, the tool shop, the Rabbit Tavern—so I made enough of it for everyone.

Special Coating X: Yellow paint. Difficult to remove after application. Visible at night.

Perfect. Now, all I have to do is fill those water balloons with this stuff.

Mina had just gotten home. I called her into the lab and explained what I'd made.

She stared at the yellow paint. “Wow. This'll mark any criminal who breaks into the drugstore?”

“Yup.”

We carefully filled the balloons with Special Coating X. I'd asked Noela to get Paula and Annabelle; I figured I should explain this new tool to them both.

Despite Paula's attitude, she was still the owner of the tool shop, and Annabelle led the mercenary brigade guarding the town.

"Done!" Mina exclaimed.

About a hundred water balloons were now full of the special coating. As we carried them into the store, Paula and Annabelle arrived.

"What's shaking, Rei Rei?" asked Paula. "Need your big sis for something? If you're gonna confess your love to me, wait till the two of us are alone!"

Noela, Mina, and Annabelle stared at me.

"Paula, stop saying dumb stuff like that, damn it. That's not why I called you here."

Annabelle sat in a nearby chair, crossing her long legs. "What's up? You never go out of your way to ask me over."

You know how some folks just look stunning when they cross their arms or legs? Annabelle was totally one of them. But I digress.

"Um, I wanted to explain these security balloons to you both." I gave them the rundown; the pair listened carefully.

Paula grabbed a balloon and inspected it. "This is it, eh? Hunh."

"Those could certainly be useful," Annabelle admitted. "But, uh, we've never really had thieves in town."

"Tee hee! Miss Annabelle, security is about *preventing* crime," Mina chimed in.

Annabelle's brow twitched. "There's nothin' to prevent, as long as the Red Cat Brigade's watchin' over things!"

"The point is that now we have something *just in case*!"

Mina and Annabelle stared each other down, electrifying the atmosphere. *Man, these two butt heads a lot, huh?* I'd noticed that during the Rabbit Tavern's Extra-Large Challenge.

"What'll you do if something happens to Mr. Reiji?" Mina snapped at Annabelle. "Or poor, weak little me?"

“*You?* Weak? You know that ain’t true. Else you wouldn’t come at me like you do! You got balls.”

“H-how rude! I’ll have you know I’m a young lady and don’t have anything of the sort!” Mina cried, taking Annabelle literally.

She tossed a security balloon at Annabelle, who tried to deflect it. The balloon exploded, covering Annabelle’s hand with the yellow paint inside.

“Mr. Reiji, they really do work! Look, she can’t get the special coating off.” Mina beamed at me.

Annabelle squeezed the balloon scraps in her hand. “Outside, freeloader.”

“Hmph! Bring it!” Mina retorted.

Don’t bring it! Stop!

They each grabbed a security balloon, heading outside.

“Could you two calm down for a second?” I pleaded. “You’re not supposed to use the security balloons like this!”

Both women glared at me.

“Quiet, Mr. Reiji.”

“Shut up, Pharmacist.”

“Er...okay.”

This was already a lost cause.

“We’ll start back-to-back, walk five paces, then throw,” Annabelle informed Mina once they were outdoors. “Got it?”

“Understood. If I win, though, you need to stop stalking Mr. Reiji!”

“I-I ain’t doin’ that! Ah—if I win, you gotta stop lettin’ the Pharmacist pay for everythin’.”

“Fine. It isn’t like I’m going to lose anyway.”

“I’m holdin’ you to that,” Annabelle told her. “Can’t wait to see you flip out when this’s over!”

Jeez. This was a real showdown—a duel in the name of honor and pride. All I

could do at this point was watch them.

As I stared at Annabelle and Mina, Noela's tail wagged excitedly. She was clearly enthralled, her eyes sparkling. "Noela, too!"

I have a bad feeling about this.

Noela trotted back into the drugstore, and as I expected, returned holding the rest of the security balloons. While Annabelle and Mina carefully counted their steps, the werewolf girl approached and flung a balloon at them, covering them in yellow paint.

Swoosh! Swoosh! Noela wagged her tail rapidly.

"Garroooo! Noela wins!"

Please, Noela. Read the room.

"Why did you do that, Noela?!"

"Beast girl!"

The pair glared daggers, flinging their balloons.

Noela dodged like it was nothing. "Too slow!"

She's absurdly athletic, I noted.



Splat! One security balloon hit something behind Noela—namely, Paula. Her glasses now painted yellow, Paula trembled.

“Paula? You okay?” I asked. “Um, they didn’t do that on purpose, so could you laugh this off? Pretty please? You’re like our big sis, right?”

“It’s...”

“It’s...?”

“It’s *on!*” Paula yelped into the open air, rummaging through the “ammunition box” Noela had brought outside. She stood up with balloons in hand, hurling them at the other girls.

“You’re never going to hit me like that, Paula!”

“No sweat!”

“Too slow!”

As Mina, Annabelle, and Noela dodged, Paula’s two security balloons struck the ground and burst, their contents splattering far and wide. They covered everyone present with paint, including me.

Paula pushed up her gunk-covered glasses. “I don’t need to hit anyone to get paint on you guys.”

I hadn’t thought that Paula was the strategic type, but here we were. *Guess those glasses aren’t just for show. Well, maybe they are right now—she definitely can’t see through them.*

Thanks to Paula’s earlier attack, I was covered in Special Coating X. And, truth be told, I wanted to join this security-balloon fight.

As I lifted a balloon and met Noela’s eyes, a thin excuse left my lips. “I mean, I have to test the drugstore’s products.”

Noela shook her finger at me. “No throw at Noela, Master!”

“Time to show you a Japanese guy’s *fighting spirit!*”

The girls and I got into a massive battle, soaking each other with yellow paint. The fight included alliances, betrayals, collusion, cooperation, secret communications, and an anti-Noela coalition. We became insanely suspicious of

each other, trusted our backs to one another, and betrayed each other, then formed new teams and sought revenge.

By the time we ran out of security balloons, the four of us had collapsed on the road, total wrecks. When we'd started, it was just past noon, but now it was dark out.

Wait. "What're we even doing?" I asked.

"Good question."

"Noela not thinking anything."

I figured.

"Gosh, Rei Rei, my muscles are gonna kill me tomorrow," Paula whined.

"You guys wasted my time, and now I'm covered in this crap." Annabelle shook her head, exasperated. "Still, I guess..."

"That was pretty fun," everyone present agreed.

The street was a mess, so we started cleaning up together. Obviously, it was more than we could handle, so we asked the Red Cat Brigade for help.

Alf came over as well, curious about what I'd done with the water balloons. "You're hopeless, buddy," he laughed heartily.

The general store manager helped us clean up the paint, a smile on his face. Zeral also visited the drugstore and, seeing the chaos, decided to help clean, too.

I'd originally planned to get vegetables at the meadow today. Since I never showed up, however, a farmer couple arrived at the drugstore. Grinning, they pitched in.

Mina and the farmer's wife eventually called, "Come eat dinner, everyone!"

The table was loaded with bread and soup, sort of like a family meal. I realized that a ton of people had helped clean the awful mess. I felt a little guilty, but more than that, I was tremendously grateful. It was a warm feeling, for sure.

"Master very popular!" Noela exclaimed.

"You think?"

She nodded proudly.

I figured it was less that I was popular and more that the townsfolk were genuinely nice. Thanks to their help, we'd cleaned the street way faster than I hoped. My slow, peaceful life had been a hoot today.

Chapter 18:

Livening Up the Town

NOELA POPPED INTO the house to tell me that a customer had arrived, and I entered the drugstore only to find Paula. As usual, the bespectacled tool-shop owner was here to kill time talking to me about whatever crossed her mind.

“I wanna liven things up, Rei Rei,” Paula told me. “You get it, right?”

“No, actually. What’re you even talking about?”

“Gear polishing’s just so boring!”

“Too bad. That’s your job.”

“Boo!” Paula exclaimed. “Serious guys like you are never popular with the ladies.”

“Wait, really?” I blurted. “Er...anyway, what do you want me to do about boring shop chores?”

“Catch some fairies who’ll polish for me while I sleep.”

“Do cleaning fairies even exist?”

“Dunno.”

As usual, a townspeople had asked the impossible. “I don’t run a fairy-catching service, got it? Hire adventurers for that.”

“If you catch some for me, I’ll kiss you.” Paula propped herself on the counter, resting her cheeks in her hands and staring at me teasingly.

Before I could say anything, Mina came in with tea at the worst possible time.

“Mr. Reiji?”

She’s smiling, but her eyes...man, her eyes...! “Y-yes?”

“I firmly believe that you *aren’t* some disgusting pervert.”

I felt like Mina had stabbed me with one of the tool shop’s swords.

“Oh, Mina can come help me polish!” Paula exclaimed. “It’s boring all alone at the tool shop!”

“I have work and chores here.” Mina smiled again and vanished into the back.

Yikes. I heaved a sigh of relief. “Look. Kirio Drugs isn’t some department store. We make and sell medicine.”

“Aw, come on!” Paula rested her forehead on the counter. “You’d be shocked at how careful you have to be polishing armor. If you screw up, it scratches or even cracks!”

Paula said that she used oil to polish and clean armor. To buff out scratches, she used something abrasive, and she used adhesives to repair things. In other words, she had different products for different tasks. *Come to think of it, Paula uses lots of stuff from Kirio Drugs.*

“And, as time passes, iron armor stiffens and gets rusty,” Paula added.

After all, iron armor wasn’t made from a single plate. Gauntlets and cuirasses consisted of multiple pieces so that the wearer could move easily.

Fine, okay. I see how rusty armor is an issue. I rose to my feet. “Since you’re a regular, I’ll do you a favor and help.”

“Ooh! Could you catch a fairy so cute that you just wanna pester it constantly?!”

“I’m not catching any fairies, Paula. I’m making a product that’ll fix your armor.”

Paula cackled, elbowing me. “Rei Rei, you whine and whine, but at the end of the day, you’re always there for me!”

“I’ll be right back.”

I left Noela in charge of entertaining Paula and headed to the lab to get to work. I could tell that someone was watching me from behind, though. It turned out that it was Mina.

“What’s up?” I asked her.

“I think you should charge Paula for this product,” Mina said. “After all, you’re

a pharmacist, and she's your customer."

"Huh? Yeah, of course." *What's she talking about?*

I looked back at the ingredients in front of me and resumed my work. *This should do the trick.* A slippery-looking fluid appeared within my bottle.

Liquid Grease: Moist, slimy lubricating oil.

"Perfect," I said. "This should fix the armor's stiffness."

"What'd you make this time, Mr. Reiji?" Mina asked.

"Want to feel it?"

"Er, I suppose." Mina extended her palm curiously. I dripped some clear grease onto it.

Mina rubbed it with her fingers, narrowing her eyes. "This is..."

"A type of lubricant. Now, Paula will—"

"Mr. Reiji! Wh-what sort of product have you made?! What're you doing with this?!" Mina cried, flushing.

Er...Paula's going to use it on armor.

"You make potions, not llotions, Mr. Reiji!" Mina growled. "Understand?"

Oh. Now I see what's going on. "You're a perv for assuming that *that's* what this grease is for."

"Wrong!"

Our pointless argument went back and forth. Suddenly, the armor grease vanished, and neither of us could figure out how. *Where did it go?*

"Whoa! Awesome! It's all slimy!"

"Noela, too! Noela, too!"

I could hear the pair in the drugstore. Noela must've nabbed the grease while Mina and I weren't watching it and then passed it off to Paula.

Sure enough, once I headed to the storefront, I spotted them playing with the lubricant. “Hey, go outside if you’re gonna goof off.”

“This is perfect!” exclaimed Paula.

“Oh, cool! Glad to hear it.” When a special-order customer said something like that, how could I not be genuinely happy?

“But...hmm...one bottle on its own isn’t quite enough. Could you make ten more right away?”

“This stuff is for polishing equipment. I highly doubt you’ll run out so quickly.”

Paula shrugged, shaking her head. “See? You’re always way too serious, Rei Rei. I’d never order ten bottles of grease just for work.”

“Use this for work, damn it!”

Paula nodded smugly. “Gotta strike while the iron’s hot!” She turned her back to me.

“What’s that supposed to mean? What’re you even gonna use ten bottles for?” *Explanation, please.*

Paula glanced over her shoulder. “What, you ask? This time tomorrow, Kalta’s gonna be bopping!”

“What?”

“Bring ten bottles to the plaza tomorrow morning, ’kay? Bye!” Just like that, she ran off with the bottle of grease in hand.

I’m so confused. How’s she going to use lotion...er, grease...to make Kalta “bop”?

The next morning, Mina and Noela were missing, and the drugstore was oddly quiet; not even Annabelle stopped by for her usual potions.

Ejil’s supposed to work today, and he’s nowhere to be found. Don’t tell me he’s playing hooky.

I wrapped up the chores in the drugstore and then made my way to the lab. Grabbing the ten bottles of grease Paula had asked for, I headed to the plaza.

As I drew closer, the area got crowded—actually, it was bustling. There were festival stalls lined up and all kinds of townsfolk hanging around. Everyone looked like they were having a blast.

I was naturally puzzled. *What's going on?*

Paula waved at me. “You’re late, Rei Rei!”

“Late for what? Nobody told me what’s happening.”

In the center of the plaza was something I’d never seen before—a five-by-five-meter iron slab with posts at each corner. It resembled a boxing ring.

“That’s for today’s main event!” Paula exclaimed. “I spent all night building it.”

“Hunh.” *I still have no clue what’s going on.*

Paula took the bottles of grease I’d brought and poured them over the iron slab. Slipping on the oil, she shrieked like a cat. “Mrrroooooow!”

Well, that stuff is slippery as heck. With an iron plate underneath it, there’ll be zero friction.

As I watched her, onlookers crowded around the ring. Eventually, the crowd made way for Doz, a Red Cat Brigade member. He wore formal attire.

“Prove yourselves using your physical fitness!” Doz bellowed. The area quieted. “Here and now, I declare the beginning of the first-ever Kalta Grease-Wrestling Tournament!”

Grease wrestling? The puzzle pieces fell into place. I looked at Paula’s iron slab again. “H-hold up.”

They’re going to compete on an oiled iron plate? Won’t this just be slimy sumo wrestling?!

“I, Doz—Red Cat Brigade Vice Captain—shall be your MC and ringside commentator! Enjoy yourselves, everyone!”

Paula, apparently the head judge, took over to explain the tournament’s basic rules to the audience. There would be one three-minute round, and whoever fell out of the ring lost.

“But why add oil to wrestling...?” I muttered to myself.

Paula gave me a thumbs-up, smirking. “What better way to liven Kalta up than a wacky festival?”

“Couldn’t you have picked something slightly less bizarre?!”

Ririka came out to serve as ring girl; she was dressed in a two-piece bikini.

“Wh-why do I have to do this?” she groaned.

The men in the audience cheered fiercely.

“You’re adorable, Ririka!”

“The gosh-dang cutest!”

“Go out with me!”

“I love you! Marry me! Pleeease?!”

“St-stop staring at me!” Ririka yelped, reddening. She fled as soon as Doz popped up again.



“Our tournament’s first match shall now commence!” Doz roared. “In the blue corner, the edgy lone wolf, *Ejiiiiil!*”

The demon king appeared from within the crowd. His cape fluttered dramatically in the wind, and he hid his face with his right hand.

He poses like that all the time, I thought, irritated. I’d wondered where Ejil was earlier, too. What was he doing skipping work?

“Hee hee!” Ejil cackled. “This is the perfect chance to show you lowly humans just how terrifying I can be. Watch carefully as I wield my magic against my pathetic opponent!”

He’s not really being “edgy,” Doz. He actually believes everything he’s saying, I mused. *Though I suppose you could describe a demon king as embodying edginess.*

“In the red corner, the cute, innocent werewolf girl, *Noooooela!*” Doz bellowed.

Noela appeared across from Ejil, wagging her tail confidently. She walked toward him, giving him a thumbs-down. “Pervert. End you, everybody sees!”

Good luck, Noela. If you manage that, you’ll be humanity’s savior.

“Heh heh heh! If you lose, my dear Noela, you’re honor-bound to let me pet your soft tail all night. I won’t give you any time to rest!”

“Only Master can pet. Pervert must die.”

Ejil and Noela exchanged fierce glares as they stepped into the ring.

“On this battlefield,” Doz cried, “Noela won’t be able to use her crazy streng—”

Swip!

The ring’s lack of friction caused Ejil to slip and fall backward, leading to an immediate loss.

“Wha—?! Pointless,” Ejil muttered.

Meanwhile, Noela entered with a proud expression.

Swip!

“Groo?!”

Swip! Swoop! Swiiiiip!

Stumbling, Noela slid over to a post and managed to grab it. Shoulders heaving, she gasped, looking at the unbelievably greasy ring with pure despair.

I don't think I've ever seen her make a face like that. Oh...she's looking at me.

“Master! Master! Slippery.”

I bet. She lost her footing over and over; she honestly looked like a newborn fawn.

“Bwa ha ha ha ha!” Ejil cackled, returning to the ring and stepping in. “Heh heh heh! My dear Noela, do you really think you can defeat me like that?!”

Swoop!

“Gyaah!”

Ejil slipped and smacked the back of his head; he seemingly couldn't move.

From outside the ring, Doz glanced at his face. “Whoa! Ejil...is unconscious!”

The demon king's kind of weak, huh?

After several attempts to push Ejil out of the ring with her shaking legs, Noela used her tail. It struck the demon king with a soft sound. *Swoof...!* Ejil slid out of the ring like a frozen tuna from a fish market.

“Your winner, *Nooooooela!*” Doz cried.

Noela pumped her fist proudly, and the crowd went wild. Struggling a bit, she managed to crawl out of the ring. “Won, Master! Pervert *destroyed.*”

I patted her head gently. “Yeah, you did good.” *But if that was just the first match, there's gonna be a second match, right?*

Ririka appeared again, this time clad in a bunny-girl outfit. The acting ring girl held a sign with the tournament sponsors' names, fidgeting nervously.

“H-hey, um, is there a point to dressing like this...?” She looked over at Paula, who nodded fiercely. “R-really? Jeez.”

Once again, the men in the crowd loved her.

“Ririka, you’re literally the best!”

“I *adore* you, Ririka!”

“Ririka’s the cutest!”

There was even a dude who talked like an old-fashioned samurai. “She’s certainly a striking maiden!”

“Please stop staring at me.” When Doz finally appeared, bunny-suited Ririka covered her face with both hands and hurried away.

Doz drove the show forward. “Now, time for our second match! In the blue corner, the welcoming-but-clumsy princess of the local pharmacy, *Miiiiina!*”

Et tu, Mina?!

The crowd parted as she appeared. “P-princess?!” she laughed. “Um, I’ll do my best!”

What are my employees thinking?! Does Mina even understand what she’s about to do? She’s wearing a skirt! This is an accident waiting to happen!

I could already picture her hem flipping up, showing off her underwear to everyone as she shrieked in embarrassment.

“G-good luck, Mina!”

“We’re rootin’ for ya!”

“You’re as cute as ever!”

The old guys were excited about her, as usual.

“In the red corner, the mercenaries’ iron-willed captain, *Annabellelllle!*”

Annabelle appeared with fierce Red Cat Brigade members in tow. She’d clearly entered combat mode; her expression was even more somber than usual.

“I refuse to lose to her!” She glowered at Mina.

“That’s my line!” Mina returned Annabelle’s intense glare. “Stop trying to seduce Mr. Reiji just because you’re pretty. If you keep at it, you’ll drive him

nuts!”

“S-saying I’m p-pretty doesn’t flatter me!” Annabelle looked away, fiddling with her red hair. “Though I suppose bein’ pretty is better than bein’ a show-off homemaker!”

“Grr...!”

I could almost see fireworks exploding between the women as they tried to step into the ring. Annabelle extended one leg slowly toward the oily iron plate. “It’s too dangerous to just jump in. I gotta be nice...and...careful.”

“Hurry, Boss! The first person who gets in the ring has the advantage!” a mercenary cried.

“I-I know that, dummy! But it’d be bad if I slipped! I ain’t pushin’ myself, got it?”

Annabelle moved slowly. Then one of her Red Cat Brigade underlings shoved her from behind. “Eek!”

Swip! Smack! She landed on her butt in the ring.

“Who did that?!” Annabelle cried. “Why the hell did you push me?! Didn’t you hear me?!”

“Huh...? Yeah! That’s exactly why I pushed you, Captain!”

I chuckled. *He paid attention.*

Meanwhile, Mina glared at Annabelle. “You really don’t get it, do you? You can’t avoid slipping during this fight.” As the crowd roared, she entered the ring with a calm expression.

Uh, Mina? Are you going to be okay wearing a skirt?

“Gracious! It’s so slippery. Th-this is dangerous. Eek!”

Mina fell face-first into the ring; her skirt flipped upward, revealing the garment below to everyone in the audience. The gentlemen’s eyes widened.

See? I knew this was going to happen. I couldn’t help covering my face.

Then the crowd stirred; I heard them yelling. They shook their heads—particularly the gentlemen.

“This is *unbelievable!*” Doz shouted. “Mina—she’s wearing *shorts!*”

Mina held her chin high; she still hadn’t pulled down her skirt. “This way, falling isn’t embarrassing!”

The gentlemen in the audience weren’t sure how to handle Mina’s shorts at first. Eventually, though, they nodded to each other.

“Th-those are pretty cute in their own right!” one exclaimed.

That’s their verdict?

“I’m not scared of anything!” Mina glared at Annabelle.

I was almost moved to tears. *Who would’ve thought a pair of shorts could make someone so brave...? Still, at the end of the day, all they’re doing is slimy sumo wrestling.*

“Come at me, freeloader!”

“This is the end of the line, stalker!”

The fierce match of pushing and pulling began.

“Haaaaah!” Annabelle roared.

She charged forward with incredible speed; Mina dodged by slipping and then steadied herself. Annabelle fell, leaving herself wide open, and Mina rushed at her, both arms outstretched.

“You’re finished!”

“Not this time!”

Annabelle ducked Mina’s attack at the last second, and the two slid away from each other. The pair’s eyes widened as they measured the distance between themselves, and they moved simultaneously.

“This is it!”

“This’s how you lose!”

The audience held their breath as the rivals’ frenzied struggle continued.

Still, all they’re doing is slimy sumo wrestling.

Clang! Clang! Clang! Paula rang the bell.

Doz slid between the competitors. “Judge Paula says this match is a *tie*! Give these two women a warm round of applause, everyone!”

“Bravo! Bravo!” the crowd cried excitedly.

Mina and Annabelle exchanged a firm handshake, acknowledging each other’s fighting spirit.

What the hell?

Ririka came out for the third time, now dressed as a maid. *There must be more matches.*

“I’m really not necessary to this tournament, am I?” She frowned. “Like, at all.”

Sighing, she continued to do her job as ring girl, holding up the event’s sponsor sign.

“You look amazing as a maid, Ririka!”

“Elf maids are adorable! I love you, Ririka!”

“Lift your skirt slightly, would you? This is terribly lewd.”

You’re the lewd one, samurai.

“Stop looking, you perverts!” Ririka snapped.

For some reason, a few gentlemen cheered.

As Ririka tossed her sign at the crowd and left, Doz popped up again. “Now then, ladies and gentlemen, time for the main event—our third match! In the blue corner, the expert sniper who never lets prey escape, *Kururuuuuu!*”

The women in the crowd screeched as the audience parted for the elven marksman, who wore what looked like a red Speedo.

Hunh. Maybe those weren’t fangirls’ screams. Maybe they were terrified shrieks at the sudden appearance of an exhibitionist. I chuckled, wondering who Kururu was up against.

“In the red corner, the brilliant, kindhearted alchemist who appeared in Kalta like a shooting star, *Reijiiii!*”

Me?! No way! This is bad! Kururu and I locked eyes. He winked, beckoning to me. *Hell no! I don't want to wrestle him!*

I tried to leave the plaza quietly, only to have tough-looking Red Cat Brigade members grab me by both arms.

"The ring's that way, Medicine God!"

"No! You can't *make* me!" But I couldn't prevent them from carrying me like some sort of luggage.

Hey! Where's Noela?! My reliable werewolf girl always goes on about how she'll protect me, no matter what!

There she is! Spotting her at a nearby food stall, I waved as hard as I could. "Noela!"

"No lose, Master!" Noela's tail wagged; her hands were full of yakisoba, takoyaki, ikayaki, and candy apples. She was clearly focused on eating something—her mouth was covered in sauce.

Well, aren't you enjoying yourself?!

"No! Stop, please! Let me down!" I yelped. "Why's he wearing a Speedo?! It's gonna slip! Is that what you want?! There are laws against public nudity! Somebody call the cops!"

Struggle as I might, the mercenaries dragged me up to the ring. Looking for a way out, I saw various Red Cat Brigade members stationed around the plaza.

Damn it! Am I stuck in this crappy tournament?! Is this compulsory? I wanted to cry.

Kururu's toned, muscular body glistened. He looked at me placidly.

One match lasts three minutes, so if I hold out... A chill raced down my spine. *No, wait! There's no starting whistle or anything. If I go right on the offense when I enter the ring, I won't even need three minutes!*

"Five seconds should be more than enough to take care of this creep!" I gasped.

The crowd erupted at my determination.

“I’ll head in first,” I volunteered, grinning.

“Ooh! Wait for me,” replied Kururu.

I’m going to make you regret that relaxed attitude.

“Good luck, Mr. Reiji!”

“Fight, Master!”

“You can do it, Doctor!”

The drugstore employees cheered me on. I shot them a confident smile. *I can win this. I made the grease on the ring, after all. I know exactly how it works!*

I just had to keep my balance as I slid. *Yeah—it’ll be like skating! If I focus on that, beating Kururu should be a cinch!*

I stepped confidently into the ring...

Swip!

“Kyaah!”

And fell spectacularly on my ass.

Damn it! It’s so slippery! How can I possibly balance when I’m a terrible athlete?! There was nothing but despair in the greased ring. *Ugh. This iron “mat” is super hard. My butt hurts. My back hurts. I just want to go home.*

“Pardon me!” The crowd cheered as Kururu spoke.

What’s happening? Twisting around, I saw that the elf in the red Speedo had his feet firmly planted in the ring. *Impossible! There’s no friction underfoot, yet he’s standing perfectly still?!*

Kururu’s expression looked like it had come out of some dramatic painting. Raising his cleft chin, he waved one hand at me as if saying, “C’mon, bro.”

Where’d that chin cleft even come from?! *It wasn’t there a minute ago! And that Speedo... Do his bathing suit and chin cleft have built-in stabilizers or something?!*

“If you’re not going to move, I’ll take the initiative. I’m going to enjoy these three minutes greatly!” Kururu dashed toward me.

The grease seriously isn't slowing him down?! That chin cleft somehow lets him ignore the laws of physics!

There was no escaping Kururu in this five-by-five-meter ring. All I could do was make peace.

“Mina, Noela, I leave the drugstore in your hands.”

Noela shook her head tearfully. “Master, no die!”

She tried to come toward the ring, but Mina hugged her from behind, wiping her tears with a handkerchief. “Mr. Reiji’s accepted defeat, Noela. Let’s honor that and watch over him in his final moments.”

Still, at the end of the day, all I was doing was slimy sumo wrestling.

Kururu closed in on me. I let out the cry of a proud Japanese man. “Come get a taste of my Yamato spirit!”

“Ha ha ha! It’s been ages, dear Reiji!” Kururu gestured excitedly. “What do you want to do?!”

He’s having fun, damn it! I can tell he’s gone mad—I can’t let him touch me. Time to run like crazy!

I wondered where my Yamato spirit had gone. Then, as I bolted, I noticed that the ring posts weren’t connected by ropes. I came up with an idea—Operation Quick Switch.

Kururu chased me joyously around the ring. I drew him as close as I could and then slid between his legs.

“Wha—?!”

Once past Kururu, I turned and locked on to his exposed back. Somehow standing on my feet, I launched a dropkick.

“Eyaaaaah!” Kururu let out a bizarre shriek as he slid from the ring.

“Your winner, *Reijiiiiii!*” Doz hollered.

I...I managed to win.

“See you in the ring next year, Reiji honey.” Dropping that death sentence with a pearly-white smile, Kururu left the plaza.

Thanks to our oily deathmatch—hardly “grease wrestling,” at this point—Kalta’s surprise tournament ended with a bang.

Later, Paula dropped in at the drugstore to tell me that she wanted to hold even bigger events. “Your match was awesome, Rei Rei! Hilarious, even! I thought the tournament was a blast!”

“Well, good for you. I’m never doing that again.”

“Next year, I’m setting up multiple rings with even more liquid grease, and—”

“That’s *not* what that stuff’s *for*!”

Paula booed at me as I chased her out and got back to my chill routine.

Only use drugstore products for their intended purpose.

Chapter 19:

The Aqua Annihilator

IT RAINED two days ago, it rained yesterday, and now it was raining today.

Seriously, what's with all the storms lately?

I didn't know whether Kalta had a rainy season. The weather was so awful, though, that I couldn't help but wonder.

I didn't have field chores or customers, so there was nothing to do. For a while, I felt like that wasn't all bad; I didn't mind relaxing and watching the rain fall from inside the drugstore. After seemingly endless days of that routine, however, let's just say I got bored.

"Reiji, pal!"

I lifted my head and saw Doz from the Red Cat Brigade wiping water off his massive body with his hands. Behind him, Captain Annabelle leaned against a shelf.

Mina brought them both towels.

"Thanks, Mrs. Kirio," said Doz.

"O-oh, gosh, I'm not...um..." Mina fled like a rabbit.

"She just freeloads off Reiji! She ain't his wife." Annabelle quickly kicked Doz.

That must've been fairly common; Doz didn't budge. In fact, he actually grinned. "Boss, what's wrong?"

"Shut up," Annabelle snarled. She sat down, clearly in a bad mood.

"So, uh, what brings you guys here in this rain?" I asked.

Doz turned to me. "Listen to this, pal. It's been nothing but rain lately, right? We bring umbrellas when we patrol, but our equipment gets soaked. And we ain't got time to dry stuff out."

Makes sense. Man, doing security work around here must be rough.

The Red Cat Brigade wore mostly leather armor, and if it constantly got soaked, it could get moldy. I understood why Doz was concerned.

“I wear iron armor, but I still gotta deal with rust and stuff,” Annabelle added. “I get Red Cat recruits to polish it every day.”

“They get in fistfights deciding who can work on the boss’s armor,” Doz agreed. “It’s less about equipment and more about chasin’ her warmth and scent.”

“Those perverts need to dial it back,” I groaned. *Seriously. That’s a little much.*

I understood why they were competitive about cleaning Annabelle’s armor, though. A beautiful woman in a traditionally male profession was bound to drive some guys wild. Annabelle seemed to realize that; she looked unsurprised.

“If you need armor maintained, you should hit up the tool shop,” I told them.

“Maintaining our armor ain’t the issue, pal,” Doz retorted. “I want you to stop this rain.”

Like hell!

“If you manage that...” Doz pulled a pair of familiar gauntlets from his bag. They were Annabelle’s; I’d seen them at Paula’s store. “I’ll let you handle these.”

That’s hardly a reward.

“St-stop it, you jackass! You’re gonna weird him out!” Annabelle grabbed the gauntlets, hiding them behind her back.

“I don’t get it,” Doz protested to Annabelle. “You have no problem makin’ *us* maintain your gear, but you don’t want Reiji to smell it?”

I wouldn’t deliberately smell her gauntlets in the first place!

“Of course not, you big, stupid jerk! It’s embarrassing.” Annabelle fell silent.

“Look, I can’t just stop rain,” I insisted. “You’re kind of asking for the impossible.”

Although I’d clearly declined, Doz reached into his bag again, pulling out a familiar bottle. “The boss drank this potion. I’ll include the bottle in your

payment.”

“Er...no need.”

Doz looked shocked. “It ain’t been washed! You still don’t want it?! Things like this are pricey among us mercs!”

“Dial it back, pervert.” *I’d prefer that you washed it, so I could recycle it!*

Annabelle rose to her feet. “We’re goin’ home, Doz. Even for a pharmacist, the impossible’s impossible.”

“Guess you’re right. Sorry about that, pal.” Disappointed, Doz grabbed the soaked umbrella he’d leaned against the wall.

His umbrella...?

“Ah! Hold on a sec!” I exclaimed. “I have an idea!”

Doz turned around, eyes twinkling. “Our Medicine God’s descended once more!”

“Hey, no need to push yourself, Pharmacist. I get that what we’re askin’ ain’t feasible.”

“It’s feasible. Just hold on.”

I didn’t feel guilty about turning down their request, but seeing them so disappointed honestly made me want to help more. I couldn’t do jack about the weather itself, but I could solve the mercenaries’ problem my own way. I headed to the lab.

Noela was in there as usual, rolling around. “Master! Noela bored.”

“How about helping me make something new?”

“On it!”

Following my medicine-making skill’s instructions, I gathered materials and got to work. Noela had been helping me for so long, she’d gotten really good at it, so the process went quickly.

Water Repellent: Prevents water damage and mold.

I couldn't clear the skies, as the Red Cat Brigade had originally requested. When I thought about it, though, they wanted better weather because moldy leather armor was a pain in the ass. In other words, I just needed to make sure that the rain didn't soak their gear.

Grabbing a brush, I took the water repellent into the drugstore. "If you coat something with this, it'll be waterproof," I told Annabelle and Doz.

Their eyes widened. "Waterproof?!"

"Uh-huh. Your stuff won't get soaked, and you won't have to deal with mold."

Opening Doz's umbrella, I brushed on some water repellent. To make the product easier to understand, I only spread it on half the fabric.

"Is that stuff really gonna keep the umbrella dry, Medicine God?" Doz found it hard to believe.

If I did a big ritual or something, I bet he'd buy in. Heh heh...I'll show him.

"Just watch." I walked outside into the downpour.

Pitter patter. Pitter patter.

Droplets fell atop the open umbrella. The fabric I'd painted stayed dry, but the rest soaked up the rain; water trickled down the handle, getting my hand wet.

Now I understood why the Red Cat Brigade's armor was getting soaked. This shoddy umbrella couldn't hold up against a rainstorm.

Setting the umbrella down tip first outside, I headed back into the drugstore with a victorious smile. Doz's jaw had nearly hit the floor, and Annabelle was wide-eyed.

"Amazing!" they cried.

"The rain just slid off the painted spot, Boss!"

"You're right! It turned into little beads of water!"

"This stuff is an aqua annihilator! Incredible, Medicine God!" Doz gave me a thumbs-up.

“Er...just to be clear, I’m not using *magic* to repel the water,” I reminded them.

“If we used this aqua annihilator on ourselves, we’d gain full water resistance!” Annabelle cried.

She’s not listening at all.

“You’re a genius, Boss!”

“Duh.”

“The Red Cat Brigade would be *invincible* when it rained!”

“Ooh! That’d be cool!”

“Right?!”

The two were their own echo chamber.

I had no idea whether the repellent would neutralize water magic. We had no mages here, so we couldn’t test it.

“Putting aside whether it’ll block water attacks, this stuff will keep your equipment from getting damp, so you won’t have to worry about mold,” I interrupted. “And it isn’t magic—got it?”

Doz elbowed me with a knowing look. “Come on, pal. We know you used anti-water magic to make this. You can’t fool us!”

“It’s because you guys think like that that I keep getting ridiculous requests,” I lamented.

Annabelle put some repellent on her gauntlets and stepped outside. She couldn’t help being impressed at its effects. “Whoa! This is crazy, all right!”

Doz bowed his huge frame. “Thank you so much, Medicine God! Now we can patrol without worrying about rainstorms!”

“Thanks, Pharmacist.” Annabelle mumbled her own words of gratitude.

“It was nothing at all.” I handed them the water repellent and saw them off.

The two had made a point of coming here for my help despite the heavy rain. I was glad I’d lived up to their expectations.

The next day, Paula walked over in the rain to hang out. She noticed the water repellent and decided to buy her own stock. Eventually, she starting selling it at the tool shop, saying something about customers using it for maintenance.

I also wound up getting a huge order from a bunch of carpenters. It was obvious what they would use the water repellent on—lumber for buildings.

And so I sat in the drugstore, watching the rain fall and hoping the water repellent would reduce the number of leaky houses around town.

Chapter 20:

The Lake Spirit and the Demon King

“HEY, COME ON. Are you still angry? I said I’m sorry.”

I sat peacefully fishing deep in the woods. Next to me, Vivi—the spirit of the lake—splashed her legs in the water in silence.

Finally, she puffed out her cheeks and glanced at me. “I *am* angry! You said we were friends, but then you disappeared for a whole month. I bet you forgot all about me. I get it—you just use the word ‘friend’ when it’s useful.”

“I can’t believe a fairy is so pissed off at me.”

“I’m not a fairy! I’m a spirit!”

Whoops. I messed up.

“See? You totally forgot about me!”

“Listen, the Rabbit Tavern wanted fresh fish, so I’m here to grab some. Help me out, Vivi. I brought you a proper rod and everything.”

I put the fishing rod in her hands and baited the hook, then applied Explosive Mr. Fisher to it.

“Oh, um, I’ll do my best...! Wait a sec! See? You changed the subject!”

“Vivi, you’re the only spirit I can count on. You get that, right?” I gave her a grave look.

Vivi gasped. “The only spirit...? O-okay, I’ll do it!”

Her face practically shone. *Spirits sure are easy to fool.* I felt kind of guilty, but hey, I’d succeeded in distracting her.

“This lake is a long way from the drugstore, okay? I don’t have many chances to come out here.”

“Yeah, I know. Sorry for being unrealistic.”

Vivi and I put all the fish we caught into the tank I’d made last time I visited.

Eventually, we split the lunch Mina had packed.

“Mina’s cooking sure is tasty,” Vivi smiled.

“Right?” I explained that Rena, the Rabbit Tavern’s barmaid, had gotten a reservation from diners who wanted lots of seafood. “I really am becoming a jack of all trades, huh?”

Well, whatever. I had free time on my hands. Plus, fishing gave me a chance to hang out with Vivi. I chuckled slightly. *It’s all good.*

Vivi turned to me. “What’s wrong with that?” she demanded seriously. “You *are* a jack of all trades. You’re even my friend.”

“To be clear, I’m not friends with you as part of my work,” I insisted. “I’m your actual friend.”

Vivi smiled, but then kicked the water. “You’re trying to cheer me up, but you’ll just leave me alone later and laugh behind my back at how gullible I am.”

“The ‘me’ in your brain sucks, huh?” *She really distrusts humans.* “If you’re that lonely, want to come work at the drugstore? You could be a part-timer. I’m not arranging transportation, though.”

I rarely made it to the lake, so maybe Vivi could visit the store.

Vivi frowned again. “Part-timer? No way.”

Eh, I get it. She’s a lake spirit who used to be worshiped by humans. I doubt her pride would let her work for one.

“Ha ha! My bad. I should’ve known.”

“If I’m going to work at the drugstore, I want to be a full-time employee.”

“*That’s* the issue?”

“Think about it. If you didn’t need a part-timer anymore, you could get rid of me. I wouldn’t want that.”

It all came back to Vivi’s fear of being abandoned. There was a flaw in her logic, though—even full-timers weren’t safe from getting fired. Given Vivi’s anxiety, I decided not to raise that point.

Wait a second. She’s a spirit, right? How does she know about working part-

time or full-time?

“About the drugstore’s temperature, Luigi—” Vivi continued.

“I’m not green!”

“Huh?”

“Wait. Wasn’t that a joke?”

“What do you mean, Luigi?”

“I’m not ‘Luigi’!” *Don’t tell me this little...!*

Standing up, I slammed Vivi with the one question now on my mind. “Hey, what’s my name?”

As I glared, Vivi began to panic. “L-Luigi...!”

“My name’s *Reiji*! And I’m not a little-brother type! You talk a big game, but you forgot my name!” Tossing my fishing rod aside, I noogied Vivi with both fists.

“Aaaaah! I’m sorry!” Vivi rubbed her head, teary-eyed.

And here I was, sympathizing with her! I sighed. “So, what were you trying to say earlier?”

“Um...well, since I’m the spirit of the lake, it’s bad news if I don’t keep my body temperature low. I can’t maintain my physical form if I’m too warm. Is there a lake near your place? Even a pond?”

That’s why she’s keeping her legs submerged, I realized. *The house has a bathtub, but there’s no way Vivi could work in it.*

Employing Vivi at the drugstore was apparently impossible. I shook my head.

“I figured you wouldn’t have one,” Vivi sighed. “Even if you did, I could never work from a pond. Still, I’m happy you offered me a job.”

After hearing her say that so sadly, how could I not want to help her?

“Oh, wait!” I cried. “We might be able to figure something out if—”

“You’re trying to get my hopes up again, aren’t you? I see how you operate.”

Whap! I delivered a swift chop to this grouch’s head.

“Ow! What’s the big idea?!”

“I’ll bring some stuff here tomorrow,” I told her. “If it works the way I hope, you’re coming to Kirio Drugs. Mina, Noela, and our part-timer will be there. I’m sure you’ll fit in just fine.”

Vivi still seemed reluctant to trust me. Although that wasn’t her fault, I couldn’t do much but assume she’d come around.

I took the numerous fish I’d caught to the Rabbit Tavern, and the next day, I went back to the lake with something from the drugstore.

As soon as Vivi saw me, she leapt out of the water. Since she was a spirit, she dried off immediately like it was nothing.

“I came just like I said I would. See?” I said, pulling some icy gel out of my bag and giving it to Vivi. *Applying this should cool her down.*

“Well? Do you feel nice and chilly?” I asked.

Vivi spun around with a bright smile like a fresh blossom. “I’m still cool! I-I can handle this! This is amazing, Reiji!”

Thank goodness. Since Vivi could work at Kirio Drugs now, I headed back to Kalta with her in tow.

“I’m going to work full-time at Reiji’s drugstore,” she whispered to herself.

“Vivi, what’re you saying? Everyone starts as a part-timer.”

“Huh?” Her look of despair was hilarious.

“Let’s just call it a trial period,” I teased her. “I don’t need useless employees, so...uh, good luck.”

“I thought we were friends!”

“Well, now I’m your boss, and you’re my part-timer.”

“You tricked me!”

“No, I didn’t.” We arrived at the drugstore.

Ejil was in the middle of cleaning the counter. He immediately bowed his head. “Welcome back, Doctor!”

“Yo. Uh, I want you to look after a new part-timer.”

“You got it, Doctor!”

I glanced around. Vivi had been right next to me a second ago, but now she was gone.

I found her staring at Ejil from a nearby alley. Her face was pale, and she trembled. “Wh-why is he here...?”

“He?” I turned toward Ejil, calling, “What’s your deal again?”

“Oh, I’m the demon king, Doctor!”

Right.

Ejil cackled loudly. Hiding his face with one hand, he struck his usual edgy pose and pointed at Vivi. “Heh heh heh...I’m your senior here!”

Why’d he introduce himself as her “senior,” not “the demon king”?

“O-okay!” Vivi stammered. “Why did I come to this crazy place...?”

“Listen well, inexperienced one,” Ejil ordered. “I shall teach you the ropes, and you shall memorize everything. Do you understand what will happen when you do?!”

“U-um...you’ll have less work?”

“Wrong! Noela will see how incredible I am for looking after the new employee!”

“Noela? I’m not so sure.”

“You call her by name, rookie?! How dare you take that attitude with—”

“Noela and I are friends.” Vivi lifted her chin proudly.

Ejil froze. “F-friends?! You and Noela?!”

I get what Ejil’s thinking. “If I impress Vivi, she’ll tell Noela. And conversation will be easier with a friend in common!” Like the old proverb: he that would the daughter win, must with the mother first begin.

Ejil suddenly knelt. “Vivi, my friend, if you wish to know anything, feel free to ask me. I’ll do my best to support you!”

Really, Demon King? Still, it was inspiring that Ejil was pulling out all the stops.

“Ah...um...okay.”

Noela had heard Vivi; she came running into the store. “Vivi!”

“Long time no see, Noela!”

“Noela super bored. Vivi play!”

“Er...but I have work.”

“Ejil here! Ejil do all work!”

“A-are you sure...?”

Vivi looked at Ejil worriedly, but his face wore a remarkably indulgent smile. He gave the girls a thumbs-up. They headed off somewhere, leaving me with Ejil, who now looked crushed. I could tell he was crying deep down inside.

“Ejil.”

“Doctor, this...this sucks.”

He’s the demon king, but I feel terrible for him. I spent my day trying to cheer Ejil up.

That was how Vivi the lake spirit started working part-time at Kirio Drugs.

Chapter 21:

Noela's Affection

PEERING INTO THE DRUGSTORE, I saw Ejil coaching Vivi. He was good at it, which wasn't surprising, considering that he ruled all demons.

"Make sure to tell Noela who taught you all this," he reminded Vivi quietly.

"Oh, yeah. Okay."

Hunh. I doubt this strategy will work on Noela, but good luck.

I approached the drugstore counter. "How're things going, Vivi?"

Vivi smiled and nodded. "Great! Ejil taught me all about prescriptions and stuff."

"If you have any problems, let me know, okay?"

"Yup! Thanks, Reiji!"

Relieved, I headed back to the lab, only to hear a familiar voice from the drugstore.

"What're you kids doin' here? Where's the pharmacist?"

"Heh heh heh...you've done well to visit Kirio Drugs!" I heard Ejil cry. "As a reward, I shall tend to your needs, redhead! Consider that an order! Bwa ha ha ha!"

As usual, the demon king had zero customer-service skill. "*Redhead...*" That sounded like Annabelle.

"Er...no need for a reward or whatever," I heard Annabelle say. "Hey, you—is the pharmacist around? Reiji?"

"Um...Luigi was here earlier, but..." Vivi had blurted out the younger brother's name again.

Vivi was fairly shy, probably due to her distrust of humans. There wasn't much I could do about that beyond giving her a chance to get used to customers.

I heard Vivi grab a potion and ask Ejil to hand it to Annabelle. Then, Annabelle went home.

The lab door swung open, and Ejil entered with a serious expression. “There’s a problem.”

“What’s up?”

“I told Vivi to ask me if she had any trouble, but she hasn’t tripped up on a single damn thing!”

“You’re the demon king, aren’t you? Stop being so whiny.”

Ejil looked as though I’d jabbed him in the gut. He knelt before me. “I want to be you!”

“Go on.” I tilted my head, curious to hear more.

“During the wrestling tournament, Noela said that only her master could touch her tail!”

“Ah, I see. If you became Noela’s master, you could touch her tail as much as you wanted, right?” Ejil didn’t want to emulate me; he wanted to become my doppelganger.

“Precisely.”

“You’ve got a nosebleed, Ejil. You okay?”

He rubbed his nose with his hand.

It’s a sleazy goal, but his logic is so pure, in a way. If I turned Ejil into my doppelganger, could Noela tell the difference?

I was kind of curious, frankly, and my medicine-making skill indicated that I could create a product like that.

“All right, I’ll make you something,” I told Ejil. “But you know the drill.”

“I’ll acquire all the ingredients!”

His eyes were as serious as they’d ever been. I was male, too; I understood his lechery. *Okay, let’s do this. I’ll make the kid’s dream come true.*

I told Ejil what I required, and he teleported into thin air. Then, since Mina

and Noela were on drugstore duty, I called Vivi into the lab to help me prep while I waited for the demon king.

“Where did Ejil head off to, Reiji?” Vivi asked. “We still had some training left.”

“He went to gather some stuff in the name of his manhood. He should be back soon.”

Vivi and I chatted until, suddenly, a light appeared in the air. Ejil descended. Kneeling again, he offered me the ingredients.

“I used my entire army to find everything, Doctor! There were multiple casualties.”

“F-for *this*?!”

“That’s why you must make this count! For all the lives lost today!”

There was no turning back now. I nodded. “I can’t let their deaths be for nothing. Leave the rest to me.”

“You have my gratitude,” Ejil replied, exiting the lab.

Giving Vivi directions, I began the treatment Ejil had requested. Vivi was surprisingly good at detailed jobs, and she picked up on things much faster than Noela. *What a helpful lake spirit!*

The treatment in the bottle glowed—it was done. “All right. Now I can make Ejil’s dream come true!”

Face On: Consume while envisioning another person. Your face will become theirs.

I hadn’t called Ejil, but he came in. “Is it done, Doctor?!”

The punk must’ve been eavesdropping.

Hurrying over, he stared at the bottle in my hand. “With this, Noela will be mine!”

“That’s not what this does,” I warned him. “But if you picture me while you drink it, you’ll become me.”

“Don’t mind if I do!”

“Good luck, kid.”

Ejil closed his eyes and sipped the potion. His face glowed, becoming identical to mine. “What do you think, Doctor?”

“Yup. That sure is me.”

Vivi looked back and forth. “But, er...Reiji...”

Ejil held his right hand to “my” face, cackling. “Bwa ha ha ha! My dearest Noela—”

“I don’t laugh like that, and I definitely don’t call her my ‘dearest.’” I couldn’t help straightening out Ejil’s bizarre Reiji. “I haven’t told Noela and Mina about this treatment, so they shouldn’t figure things out too soon. Be careful, though. Noela’s a smart cookie.”

“R-right. A smart, delicious cookie. I’m going to rub her soft tail...” Wiping away his nosebleed, the demon king left the lab.

Is that kid gonna be okay? I mean, the potion only changes your face. Ejil’s still talking like he usually does, and he’s dressed the same to boot.

“Ejil’s shorter than you, Reiji,” Vivi said. “Is that gonna be a problem?”

“Ah.” *Crap. It totally is. Nobody’s going to fall for this.* “Why didn’t you point that out sooner? I just realized!”

“W-well, you were both so excited!”

Vivi and I peeked into the storefront.

“My dear...er...Noela,” Short Reiji called. “Would you allow me to pet your tail?”

“Groo? What wrong, Master?” Noela tilted her head inquisitively. “Very sudden.”

Mina, on the other hand, narrowed her eyes. “Is it just me, Mr. Reiji, or are you...less tall?”

I'd totally forgotten about Mina. *An unexpected obstacle to Operation Libido.*

"How dare you imply something is wrong with me, woman?!" Short Reiji roared.

Call her Mina, you idiot! And you're still acting like a pompous ass!

"Master smell different." Noela walked up to Short Reiji, sniffing.

He grinned like a fool. "Y-you've noticed that I changed my scent!"

"Garoo! No kidding."

Phew. Crisis averted.

Mina continued to gaze suspiciously at Short Reiji. "Changed your scent? You don't usually wear cologne, Mr. Reiji."

We were on the brink of disaster. I sent Vivi to explain the situation quietly to Mina, calling them both back to the house.

"So, that's what's going on," Mina said. "You shouldn't make odd treatments like that, Mr. Reiji."

"Look, Ejil's struggling lately. I wanted to give him a break."

Mina let out an exasperated sigh. "Do you have any left?"

"Wha...? Uh, yeah. Ejil only took a sip."

Short Reiji put his hands on Noela's shoulders, puckering up as blatantly as possible.

"What wrong with mouth, Master?" Noela asked.

"I-I thought I'd start with a kiss. Then, let me touch your tail!"

Touching her tail is steamier than kissing?

"Fine," said Noela. "Noela want fresh potion first. No drink potion today."

"Uh, f-fresh?"

Right. I hadn't given Noela a potion, and she always said that freshly made potions tasted best.

"Wh-what's wrong with the potions on the shelf?" Short Reiji protested.

“They’re no different.”

“Master always make for Noela.”

“Geh!” Ejil couldn’t make potions; he was desperately seeking an out. Unfortunately, that was proving to be his downfall.

“Master weird today!” Noela snarled. With a deadly serious expression, she backed away from Short Reiji. “Same tall as Noela! Smell different! Like Ejil!”

“Gah! Wait!”

This isn’t good. She’s basically figured him out!

“Heh heh heh! As I expected, beloved, you have done well and seen through my facade! No, I am not the good doctor. It is I, Demon King Ejil!”

“Garroooo! You?!”

Wait, Noela didn’t actually figure it out?! That moron screwed himself over! Ugh...everyone participating in this charade is an idiot.

“But with *this* face, you won’t be able to smack me! I shall have my way with that fluffy tail of yours!” Ejil cackled. “Bwa ha ha ha ha!”

Noela clenched her fists. “*Hate Ejil!*”

Ka-blam!

“Blaaagh!”

Noela’s sucker punch sank deep into Short Reiji’s face, and he flew into a shelf, unconscious.

Ejil’s face was back to normal; it seemed as though the treatment had run its course. Unfortunately, a bunch of potion bottles were on the floor, smashed.

“Noela...r-remember important thing to do!” The werewolf girl zipped from the drugstore like she’d been catapulted.

Well, I egged Ejil on, so I share the blame this time. I’m not gonna get on her case.

As I cleaned up the bottles, Vivi popped in. “Do you have a second, Reiji?”

“What’s u—actually, where’ve you been?” I demanded. “You were here till a

while ago! Eh, whatever. Can you help me?”

“Oh, of course! Um...where I’ve been isn’t important. Noela’s waiting for you in the lab!”

“What? She is?” *Is she going to apologize for damaging stuff?*

Leaving Vivi with the cleaning, I made my way to the lab. When I opened the door, Noela leapt at me.

“Master!”

“Hey now, what’s the deal?” I petted Noela’s head gently. She clung to me, happily howling a tune.

When I went to sit down, Noela announced, “Borrow lap, Master.” She put her head there as soon as I crossed my legs. Then, seemingly tired of her position, she sat on my lap, facing me. “Master! Master!”

“What’s the matter?” I asked. *Noela really wants to be doted on.*

“Noela love Master! Meow!” She hugged me tightly.

“Oh, um, thanks.” I stroked her head some more. When was this going to end?

“What think of Mina, Master?”

“Well, that came out of nowhere. Let’s see...she’s a huge help. Awesome at chores and cooking, and pretty much perfect when it comes to housework. I’m endlessly grateful. Thanks a bunch.”

“Wh-why thank Noela, meow? Noela not Mina. Meow.”

“Hey, Mina, can we maybe wrap this up?”

“Wha—?! I-I’m—er, I mean, Noela isn’t Mina! Meow!”

“Noela doesn’t meow!”

After opening the door, it had taken me approximately three seconds to realize who “Noela” was. I’d noticed her height when she embraced me—Noela was petite, but Mina was actually tall.

“Your hair’s totally different,” I told Mina. “You’re blonde. Noela’s hair is

silver. Have you looked in a mirror?”

“Th-that’s just coincidence, meow...!”

I told you, Noela doesn’t meow. And please don’t say that with such a sheepish expression. It’s extra embarrassing if you don’t copy her completely!

“Noela’s wolf ears are on top of her head, but your ears are on the side,” I added. “Plus, you have no tail. You’re clearly a fake.”

“Wh-when did you realize it was me?”

“Finally throwing in the towel?” I chuckled. “I figured you out at the start.”

Mina instantly turned bright red. “Eek! You big jerk!” She hit my chest. “Why did you play along?!”

“I mean, you were trying so hard.”

“No! Don’t say any more, please!”

“Oh, I get it,” I assured her. “You figured that, by stealing Noela’s identity, you could make me dote on you as much as you wanted.”

“Stop!”

“Noela not Mina! Meow!” I mimicked.

“Quiet!” Mina shrieked. When I just looked at her face, she did resemble Noela. “You’re such a jerk, Mr. Reiji!”

Tears running, Tall Noela stormed out of the lab.

Needless to say, I didn’t sell the face-on treatment. My employees were idiots, so things had turned out fine, but who knew what messes that stuff would cause if I mass-produced it?

Still, at the end of the day, I’d heard things I didn’t normally hear, and the staff got to say what was on their minds. So, I suppose it all worked out!

Afterword

GREETINGS! Kennoji here.

It's been about seven months since Volume One's release. Now, here I am with Volume Two. Sorry to keep you waiting! Oh—you weren't waiting? Er... well then.

In Volume Two, this relaxed, *Doraemon*-esque tale continued as usual. I plan to remain on this path of zero seriousness. If there's a third volume, Reiji will stay nice and goofy, don't worry.

Oh—this is a side note, but there's going to be a manga adaptation! Going forward, you can read about the winner of the “Incredible Fluffiness” Award (judged by yours truly), Noela, in manga form! Look forward to it!

I also have another work that's currently being adapted into a manga. *Kou-2 ni Time Leap Shita Ore ga, Touji Suki datta Sensei ni Kokutta Kekka* (*The End Result of Traveling Back in Time to My Second Year of High School and Confessing to My Beloved Sensei*) is currently available as a series published by GA Bunko. It's a super romantic comedy, so folks into that genre should definitely read it.

That's it for personal advertisements! Now, I'd like to thank everyone who's helped me.

To my editor: first, you selected my work to publish. Now, you've gotten me a manga adaptation. I'll never be able to thank you enough.

To Matsuuni-sensei: thanks so much for skillfully navigating my requests and drawing such lovely illustrations. I look forward to continuing to work with you.

I'd also like to thank everyone who had anything to do with publishing this series.

Finally, thank you, dear reader. Those of you in the bookstore reading the afterword early, feel free to take this book to the register!

I'm going to keep putting my all into this. I hope you stay with me!

FROM THE AUTHOR

Kennoji

I was making a point of going running four or five times a week, but during the winter, I skipped a bunch of jogs and gained a lot of weight...a whole lot of weight (too bad). Please, someone, make me some weight-loss medicine!



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